



Exploring the perceived preparedness of clinical and counselling psychology students for the newly acquired roles as intern psychologists

**By**

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### Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is entirely my original work unless otherwise indicated in the text. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. No part of this work has been submitted to any other University in the application for any qualification.

Signature:



\_\_\_\_\_

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Date: August 2021

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*“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”*

*2 Timothy 4:7*

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### Dedication

To all aspiring clinical and counselling psychologists. The journey of becoming psychologist is one that is without a finish line, embrace everything that comes with it. Keep your light beaming, many will look to yours in search of their own.

## List of acronyms and abbreviations

**HPCSA-** Health Professions Council of South Africa

**HSRC-** Health Systems Research Council

**HST-** Health Systems Trust

**LMICs-** Low Middle Income Countries

**SADAG-** South African Depression and Anxiety Group

**UKZN-** University of KwaZulu-Natal

**WHO-** World Health Organization

## Abstract

**Background:** The training of clinical and counselling psychologists in South Africa has continuously received research attention as it is arguably rich in diversity and presents with the nuances of contextual factors influencing the training and wellbeing of trainee psychologists. South African psychology is inherently embedded in the politics of apartheid ideology and colonial oppression, marginalisation, elitism, unequal power relations and social control (Macleod & Howell, 2013). Consequently, the traditional training model has also been under scrutiny to ascertain its efficacy, given the contextually diverse challenges clients present for psychotherapy. The overall objective of the study is to identify the influential factors that contribute to the trainee psychologists' perceived preparedness for their newly acquired professional roles.

**Methodology:** The study explored the perceived preparedness of clinical and counselling trainee psychologists for their professional roles, using a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to uncover the underlying trainee psychologists' subjective experiences of the master's training programme and the perceived impact on their professional competence. The researcher conducted five one-on-one in-depth interviews with intern psychologists who were enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The accumulative data was categorised into codes using the stepwise thematic analysis method. Themes were consolidated with the help of the ecological systems model, adopted as a methodological framework, characterised by an integrated, holistic approach that is relevant when exploring subjective experiences. The ecological systems theory gave insight to the exploration of contextual factors that have an impact on students' personal and professional development.

**Findings:** The emergent findings of the study indicate that most participants reportedly experienced the professional training as being stressful, identifying concurrent academic, clinical, and therapeutic demands deeply entrenched in the training process. Moreover, trainees as illustrated in the findings, constantly put themselves under significant pressure to perform well despite not sharing their challenges with other trainees in the programme. Over the years, the increasing demands of the training have evidently become the fibre of the development of psychologists. The interviewing process provided participants the opportunity to retrospectively reflect on the nuances of their training experiences, which positively contributed to building their emotional and intellectual insight pertaining the technical and soft skills acquired in the first year of training.

The study findings have been instrumental in generating knowledge of the process of stress and coping, understood from the transactional perspective. Most trainees reported having been inadequately supported during first-year training, consequently reducing their sense of professional competence coming into the internship as they reportedly had anxiety from the previous year. The study findings have been instrumental in generating knowledge of the process of stress and coping, understood from the transactional perspective. The research illuminated the importance of understanding the contextual background of individuals when exploring stress and coping within training setting such as the professional psychology training.

**Conclusion:** South Africa presents with a multi-layered diverse context; the research study has shed light on the experiences trainee psychologists encountered as they navigate the complexities of their first year of training in preparation for their intern year. Contextual factors were found to significantly influence the responses to stress and inform coping, multiple pragmatic recommendations are suggested to help trainee psychologists to function adequately in their professional development and personal growth. These include sensitivity to the needs of trainees, the possibility of offering support and therapy groups for trainees is recommended as an important factor for training institutions to consider. The need for competency-based supportive structures within the training programme has been illuminated by the current findings highlighting the constantly changing contextual challenges significantly influences ones' sense of development.

**Keywords:** clinical and counselling trainee psychologists, clinical supervision, COVID-19, master's training, mental health, professional psychology, South African psychology

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### 1.1 Chapter introduction

The discipline of psychology is considered influential in the scope of mental health as it plays a crucial role in conceptualizing diagnostic information, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses (Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021). Statistics published by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG, 2017) indicated that one in six South Africans suffer from anxiety and depression or substance-use related problems. Research further revealed that 40% of people living with HIV in South Africa present with a diagnosable mental disorder (SACAP, 2019). The primary burden of mental healthcare falls on the healthcare providers, says Chambers of SACAP as community healthcare workers such as lay counsellors and community leaders are observed needing to step in where institutionalised health resources and services, particularly mental health, are not available (SACAP, 2019). The increase in demand for appropriate mental health services relevant to the South African contextual diversity has made a call to reflect on socio-political factors that intricately underpin the socio-historical and socio-power dynamics of contemporary societies (SACAP, 2019).

The mental health status in the South African context necessitates a uniquely South African solution. SACAP suggested that the intervention of producing skilled professional counsellors/therapists is vital in the solution (SACAP, 2019). The current study focusses on the exploration of training programme with the intent of unpacking the multifaceted influential factors of practice of psychology. It is important to deliberate on the unique contributions that emerge from the interactions between people and the environment as the study delves specifically on the experiences of trainee psychologists.

### 1.2 Background of the study

Psychology both as a discipline and a profession has always been perceived as a socio-political project that is complicatedly intertwined with socio-historical and socio-economic power dynamics in modern societies (Macleod, 2004). Psychologists should aim at producing knowledge that not only engages with diverse socio-political misgivings found to exist in South Africa but to also contribute to overcoming the multiple root causes of social inequalities (Macleod & Howell, 2013). It has also become rather difficult to separate psychology from the socio-economic and socio-historical concerns and inequities that characterize modern societies (Macleod & Howell, 2013).

Within the South African context, the profession of psychology has been inherently embedded in the politics of apartheid ideology and colonial oppression, marginalisation, elitism, unequal power relations and social control (Macleod & Howell, 2013). Theorists have argued that South African psychology has been complicit in the perpetuation of apartheid ideology and the abuse of human rights (Dawes, 1985 as cited in Macleod & Howell, 2013). Under such a political dispensation, reinforced by systematic and structural inaccessibility of psychological services, psychology benefited the White middle-class South Africans to the exclusion of the psychological needs and issues of the majority of impoverished South Africans.

The unequal dispensation of psychological services, mostly located in urban hospitals and not in rural communities, was argued to have added to the inaccessibility of these services to most South Africans (Macleod & Howell, 2013). Over the years, the staggered health service delivery has consequently resulted in major inequities in the distribution and provision of mental health services across South Africa. These factors were seen to contribute to the role that psychology plays in the promotion of racial classification and oppression (Sher & Long, 2012; Leach et al., 2003; Rock & Hamber, 1994 as cited in Pretorius, 2012). Furthermore, the argument that there have been no attempts to critically question cultural systems, and the bias manifests in gender and race research. There is an under-representation and marginalisation of Black South Africans in the profession, particularly Black South African women.

South Africa's health system currently comprises a large public sector that serves approximately 84% of the population, while the other 16% of the population serves the affluent minority (Docrat et al., 2019). The country's health budget amounts to 40% of the overall health budget, and it is funded by the state. This places the public health system under extreme pressure in efforts to increase health care accessibility, including mental health services in keeping with the global health standards (Docrat et al., 2019). South Africa has since taken critical steps towards strengthening its mental health system, the reforms were inclusive of reforming the Mental Health Care Act 17 of 2002. The implementation of the South African National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2013-2020 as well as National Health Insurance (NHI) policy in 2017 has propelled a shift in health service delivery. NHI aimed to promote equity in mental health service delivery as enshrined on the Universal Health Coverage (Department of Health, 2002; 2013; 2017).

Despite the various policy reforms and legislative frameworks implemented, one of the ongoing concerns regarding the country's mental health status is that of an increasing demand for mental health services vis-à-vis a few practicing psychologists. South Africa's population is approximately 58.78 million (Statistics South Africa, 2019). In 2020, there were 7 937 registered psychologists and of these, 943 were working on contractual basis as community service and intern psychologists Medpublish (2020). The recently published mental health statistics serve as an illustration of how South Africa may still be severely under resourced, characterised by insufficient facilities and infrastructures to provide the needed mental health care services Medpublish, (2020).

The above resonates with the persistently concerning history of South Africa's critical shortage of mental health services that continues to burden the national health system. This has propelled institutions such as the University of Cape Town and the South African Medical Research Council to conduct evaluative studies with the aim of reflecting on the state of mental health expenditures and budget allocation (Docrat, Besada & Lund, 2018). The evaluation sought to shed light on the inefficiencies and constraints that emanate from the existing mental health investments in South Africa (Docrat et al., 2018).

The reality of many people in South Africa is that they still engage in psychological services in a language that is not their first language which may pose as a challenge as the linguistic nuances and meaningfulness of the discourses presented (Suffla & Seedat, 2004). A short dissertation exploring South African psychologists' perceptions of multicultural and social justice competence, (Thusi, 2019) reported that some psychologists have found language differences to significantly impact their therapeutic relationship with clients. The study elaborated on how most practicing psychologists felt that language differences posed practical challenges to the process of conducting counselling sessions due to the limitations in the nuances of the spoken language, which inadvertently affects communication between the client and the psychologist (Thusi, 2019). Notably, some psychologists expressed their grievances regarding the difficulties faced when clients cannot speak English, stating that it then becomes a practical difficulty for conducting counselling. This research finding stresses the need for psychologists to be attuned to the diverse South African context and acknowledge their responsibility of being able to speak or learn a language largely spoken by most people in the context in which they work (Thusi, 2019).

South Africa's predominant social determinants are characterised by the power of race operating as socio-economic and political fibers of the country. These social determinants have prompted universities, as they are strategically positioned to promote transformation at a much broader scale and larger context. Together with the social and structural transformation of the larger context, the discipline of psychology, particularly the training of psychologists in higher education institutions must incorporate such changes into their programmes (Pillay, Ahmed & Bawa, 2013). The effective training of psychologists is considered an important responsibility that must always be upheld (Jones, 2008). Given the history of the discipline of psychology in South Africa, the constant vigilance and self-monitoring is an imperative. This is pertinent especially if developments were made in attempts to redress the key drivers of social inequalities and social injustices within a professional sphere. This is due to the nature of the profession and the level of potential it has to influence people's lives and the broader community (Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021).

Psychologists must be equipped in the best possible way to ensure that a sound and efficient *modus operandi* is maintained (Jones, 2008). However, this poses as a challenge in the field of psychology, globally because the minimum standard to qualify for training and registering for practice as a psychologist is a compulsory master's level degree. The University of KwaZulu-Natal's discipline of psychology stipulates that each candidate's probability of success in gaining admission to the program is approximately eight percent. Therefore, it is important that candidates selected into the program should demonstrate certain competencies required for client management and skills development (University of KwaZulu-Natal Psychology Discipline, 2017). The process of applying for admission into a master's degree in psychology is increasingly reported to be associated with negative experiences because most students enter the field of psychology without doing necessary research on what the profession is, and how one qualifies as a psychologist (Rodrigues, 2002).

Research conducted by Michalec and Keyes (2013) concurs with that of Rodrigues (2002), and other reports on the increase in anxiety, depression and burnout amongst training psychologists (Ally, 2016). The above-mentioned trends are also prevalent among other health professions training programs such as medical students (Michalec & Keyes, 2013). Studies conducted on the mental health of training students within the helping professions appears to be markedly fragmented, and the focus has primarily been on students' emotional well-being and psychological functioning. The deterred emotional well-being and psychological functioning,

expressed through the disinterest in social interactions, prominent during the training period allude to the detachment trainees have to their external environment (Michalec & Keyes, 2013; Ally, 2016).

It is argued that South African psychology is “yet to fully embrace its social transformation agenda” (Seedat & Suffla, 2017, p.515). Further, traditional training models need to be reviewed in terms of strategies, curricular and content to be fully applicable and meet the current mental health demands (Pillay & Kriel, 2006). For psychology to be truly relevant, responsive, and accessible to serve the mental health needs of the South African population, trainee psychologists need to be equipped with not just a repertoire of academic, research, and practical skills but also be able to draw on the ability to reflect and engage critically. Trainee psychologists need to be trained to meet the multiple socio-political transformation challenges and issues facing the psychology profession in South Africa. It is more than two decades ago since many training programmes across universities in the country embraced the task of producing a new type of graduate (Gibson, Sandenbergh & Swartz, 2001), with a broader focus on the community and society.

A brief article published by one of the renowned national news publishing houses quoted “mental health may be one of the biggest challenges we face in 2021” (TheWitness, 2021 Feb 09). This statement was made considering the progressively observed psychological impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on people. People across the world, more so in South Africa, suffered a great deal because of several measures put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19. There was a notable increase in persons presenting with mental health distress as national regulations to shut down the country had long-lasting effects not only on their livelihoods, but also their mental health (TheWitness, 2021). The permanent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has beyond responsible doubt weigh heavily on the psychological well-being of many however there has been a slowed response in providing contingency plans to eradicate the impact. The increasing stress levels related to the pandemic are reportedly making people more susceptible to Common Mental health Disorders (CMD) such as depression and anxiety.

Pillay and Barnes (2020) stated that COVID-19 has brought a new range of challenges at a very crucial stage where disadvantaged nations were still struggling with the existing health and socio-economic burdens. Further reports from (TheWitness, 2021) reflected on the mental

state of people who previously presented with mental conditions which may have been disproportionate due to reduced resilience and consequently led to relapse or worsening of the condition. Research forecasting the effects of the COVID-19 have identified the profound effect on one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. The reported increase in stress levels as stated were described to have been as a result of fear and panic that generated globally since the outbreak (Pillay & Barnes, 2020). The widespread and varied presentation of negative changes on moods, behaviour, thoughts has been indicative of mental health deterioration which is correlated to the pandemic (Pillay & Barnes, 2020).

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) recently conducted a population-based survey, which found that 54% of South Africans viewed themselves as moderate to high risk for contracting the virus, suggesting some level of anxiety about their current situation (Human Sciences Research Council, 2020). Furthermore, the South African Society of Psychiatry (SASOP) has postulated that the high levels of complex bereavement, uncertainty for the future, inducing stress and anxiety amid the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The already noticeable effects of COVID-19 pandemic have emphasized the urgent need of psychosocial intervention to be implemented to protect their minds and build personal resilience (TheWitness, 2021).

Globally, mental health practitioners have predicted that the pandemic will have an overwhelming impact on the mental health of many people, with an expected increase in cases of depression, suicide, and self-harm because of COVID-19. Although statistics on South Africa's COVID-19 induced mental health burden have not yet been published, studies from other low to middle income countries (LMICs) have shown a 20% increase in mental illness since the global outbreak (TheWitness, 2021). Experts have reflected on how everyone is either directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19 associated with the daily fears of losing loved ones to the virus, or the possibility of contracting this novel virus (SASOP, 2021).

Trainee psychologists find themselves entangled within multiple contextual factors such as socio-political issues, health system, training environment, family dynamics and personal experiences. This observation has led to the current study seeking to explore the prominence of contextual factors in trainee psychologists' trajectories and emphasize the need to apply their skills to the socio-economic liberation of South Africans. It is crucial to note how professional psychological training can be extremely demanding and stressful for students (Ally, 2016).



Nonetheless, there may still be an unacknowledged pressure placed on students to be committed to the changing dynamics of psychology in South Africa, calling for social transformation to observe the current mental health demands, and most recently, the psychological impact of the global, COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative that training programmes provide students with the necessary support to help them manage the inherent stress that is induced by the taxing training process (Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021). This highlights the urgent need to explore issues that are driving the lack of a progressive shift in South African psychology.

### 1.3 Research questions

Overall research question: What mediating factors influence the desired growth and perceived barriers in the professional training of novice psychologists?

Questions to be answered in the research

1. What challenges have trainee psychologists encountered during their training that impacted their personal and professional development?
2. What coping mechanisms did trainee psychologist devise when they were under distress during, and beyond the course of their training?
3. What were the key contextual factors influencing their perception of trainee psychologists' professional competencies?
4. What suggestions for improving the transition from student psychologist to intern psychologist during the first year of training were offered by trainee psychologists?

### 1.4 Ethical clearance

The process of obtaining ethical clearance for this study required the application to the University of KwaZulu-Natal Registrar's office for gatekeeper approval to recruit master's students as study participants. Upon obtaining gatekeeper's approval an application was made to the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Ethical clearance was obtained (protocol reference number: HSS/0429/019M).

## 1.5 Outline of the dissertation

### **Chapter One: Research introduction**

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the study. It elaborates on the relevant background information, with an emphasis on the rationale of the study. In this chapter, a description of the research problem is provided, and the purpose of the study is clearly stated. The key questions to be answered are also presented. The introductory chapter is an important aspect of the study because it serves as a blueprint, and further guides the reader regarding the content to expect in this research report.

### **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Chapter Two is a review of the relevant literature on professional psychology and experiences of trainee psychologists. The chapter presents literature arranged into multiple headings and sub-headings, to guide the reader through the multi-layered factors relevant to the study. The review creates a synergy of prominent factors that significantly contribute to understanding the experiences of trainee psychologists. Relevant literature covers the exploration of important constructs such as personal and professional skills development, competency in contextual therapeutic modalities, trainee's quality of life and psychological well-being. The last part of the chapter is a presentation of the theoretical framework that guided the study. The aim of the theoretical framework is to provide conceptual understanding and gain insight into the subjective experiences of trainee psychologists.

### **Chapter Three: Research methodology**

The chapter presents an overview of the research methods, focusing on such important aspects as research design and the paradigm within which the study is located. In this chapter, a brief description of the sample characteristics, selection of participants, and a descriptive account of how data was collected and analysed. The ecological systems theoretical framework is included in adjunct to the conceptual framework to analyse the data and further discusses the systemic model. Additional information that the chapter includes is that of measures taken to ensure trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

### **Chapter Four: Presentation of Findings**

In this chapter, the findings generated through semi-structured individual interviews are presented using a qualitative approach, which relates to the research questions. These findings are thematically presented with the aid of the qualitative analysis so as to convey as closely as possible the subjective perceptions and collective experiences of trainee psychologists. The

discussion section is integrated into the chapter. It elaborates extensively on the findings while making reference to the available literature and the theoretical framework used in the study.

### **Chapter Five: Overview and Findings of Mesosystem level**

The chapter presents the findings in categorised themes relevant to the mesosystem. The study further integrated thematic analysis to structure formulated themes and each theme was supported by an extraction from the data to give credibility to the emergent themes. The discussion of the study findings was also assimilated into the chapter to develop a coherent argument for the outcomes presented.

### **Chapter Six: Overview and Findings of exosystem and macrosystem levels**

In this chapter, the reader is taken through the emergent findings as a result of the interconnected systems and links between the exo- and macrosystems. Themes were also formulated to illustrate the influences of contextual factors on individuals.

### **Chapter Seven: Self Reflexivity: *“The researcher and trainee psychologist entangled”***

The reflexivity chapter serves as an insider in the research study process to keep a check on my subjectivity during the study and found that drawing on comparisons with my own experiences led to deeper insights of the participants’ experiences and understandings, and this effectively enabled me to probe the data more deeply.

### **Chapter Eight: Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations**

The chapter concludes the exploration of the perceived preparedness of clinical and counselling trainee psychologists in light of their newly acquired professional roles as intern psychologists by providing a succinct summary of the study outcomes. Emergent limitations of the study are presented and thereafter concluding comments and reflections were made. Lastly, the chapter provides recommendations emanating from the study findings and possible areas for further research.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Chapter introduction

Chapter two draws on literature relevant to the current study, which aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the various factors that contribute to the trainee psychologists' perceptions of their training experiences and subsequent professional preparedness. The chapter unpacks the existing literature on the practice of psychology, specifically exploring how trainee psychologists experience the training process leading up to their professional roles. Moreover, the study uncovers the multilayered contextual factors that influence the stress and coping of trainee psychologists within the South African context (Williams, 2011). The conceptual framework by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) titled the Transaction theory of stress and coping guides the study and is deliberated extensively in this chapter.

### 2.2 The identity of South African psychology

According to Duncan and Bowman (2009), South Africa's democratic national elections of 1994 ended racist legislation that had resulted in South Africa being coined one of the reviled states of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Although the 1994 democratic elections and South Africa's post-apartheid Constitution of 1996 explicitly forbade any form of racism, it is argued that the South African society has continued to be strongly characterised by racial power operating as the determinant of social segregation, interaction, and identity (Duncan & Bowman, 2009). In this context, racism took on many forms; it manifested itself in persistent race-based residential division, ongoing patterns of social relationships, public spaces and the untoward negative portrayal of Blacks in the media (Dixon, Tredoux&Clack, 2005; Duncan, 2003; Durrheim, 2005).

The historical roots of South African psychology are often linked to the deeply entrenched historical account of South Africa's socio-political history that closely aligns with and the science and practice of psychology (Bhana, Petersen&Rochat, 2007). Notably from the academic origins to the professionalisation of the fields of clinical, counselling, educational and industrial psychology (Bhana, Petersen&Rochat, 2007). The historical development of psychology and the subsequent emergence of community psychology were found to have resulted from the political pressures and the disaffection emerging from the academic community which were confronting the uncritical theories, methods and practice of psychology in South Africa (Seedat, Duncan & Lazarus, 2001; Seedat, MacKenzie&Stevens, 2004).

Psychology is deeply entrenched in the society's socio-economic and socio-historical concerns and, consequently, the inequalities of modern societies that the profession, to a certain extent,

cannot be viewed in isolation (McLeod & Howell, 2013). With specific reference to the South African context, psychology is a profession that has been inherently compounded by the politics of the apartheid ideologies and colonial oppression which were characterised by marginalisation, elitism, unequal power dynamics and skewed social control (McLeod & Howell, 2013).

Patterns of racialised inequality and numerous psycho-social stressors have been persistent irrespective of the development of theories of psychology and the implementation of psychological studies and interventions that seek to counteract the deleterious influence of racism on the South African society (Duncan & Bowman, 2009). Macleod and Howell (2013) argued that for psychology to uphold its relevancy and appropriately serve the needs of humanity in a progressive society like South Africa, generative psychological theories and research in productive psychology ought to be ensured to guarantee the provision of appropriate and relevant psychological services. Therefore, psychology in the South African context ought to be less congruent with Western perspectives and immerse itself in the diverse cultural beliefs and values of the South African society (Macleod & Howell, 2013; Ally, 2016).

These perceptions of psychology as a profession have influenced theorists to argue that psychology in South African has been complicit in the exacerbation of apartheid ideologies and the abuse of human rights (Dawes, 1985 as cited in MacLeod & Howell, 2013). MacLeod and Howell (2013) argued that the practice of psychology rarely recognized Black communities as the majority of the psychological services were predominantly available to and benefited White middle-class South Africans. Due to the different cultural beliefs and practices, the lack of affordability and the inaccessibility of psychological services to the majority of the South African population contributed to the profession being unpopular within the Black communities, resulting in significant inequalities in the distribution and provision of mental health services across South Africa (Ally, 2016).

### 2.3 Probing the relevance of the practice of psychology to the majority of South Africans

The social movements and transformation South Africa has undergone since the installation of the democratically elected government have instigated radical demographic changes in regulatory boards and professional psychology (Ally, 2016). These opportunities have helped to extend the engagement of socially relevant work, thus reflecting the reality of existing circumstances, mental functioning, and social problems majority of South Africans are faced with. Therefore, research on the practice of psychology continues to engage in ongoing efforts

to reflect the disparities between the pre-apartheid and post-apartheid eras and to show the significant impact of these eras on people's perception of psychology and its accessibility to all South Africans (Bhana et al., 2003; Ally, 2016).

Political and social transformations in South Africa have created practical challenges for practicing and trainee psychologists as they are often required to meet both the present and the future challenges and the factors contributing to continued progression and the advancement of psychology in South Africa (Ally, 2016). Focus has also shifted to the country's rich diversity, which has necessitated the provision of psychological services to all those who needed them regardless of the differences in settings. The South African psychology discipline is predominantly characterised by remnants of colonial oppression and apartheid which cannot be ignored, warranting the need to subject the training of psychologists to scrutiny (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004).

The practice of psychology comprises psychological assessments and psychotherapy. The study has engaged extensively on the clinical practice of psychologists within the South African context, making it imperative for the study to instigate the psychometric tests and psychological assessments that constitute the practice. Laher and Cockcroft (2014) stressed that under the apartheid system, psychometric tests and psychological assessments were misused to support the established job preferences and reservation policies. Laher and Cockcroft (2014) further deliberated on the tests and assessment processes, indicating that tests were developed and standardised on educated White South Africans and to be administered to illiterate or poorly educated Black South Africans with the results being used to justify their exclusion. This practice resulted in the Black South African population generally mistrusting the psychological assessments (Foxcroft & Davies, 2008; Nzimande, 1995; Sehlapelo & Terre Blanche, 1996 as cited in Laher & Cockcroft, 2014).

South Africa has made great strides pertaining to the development of policies which have focused on poverty alleviation and improving economic growth since the abolishment of apartheid (Triegaardt, 2006; Govender, 2016). Although the new constitution seeks to protect all South Africans against discrimination, the country still grapples with numerous social injustices such as racial discrimination (Govender, 2016; Thusi, 2019). A 'controversial' article titled "*Age and Education-Related Effects on Cognitive Functioning in Colored South African Women*" by Nieuwoudt, Dickie, Coetsee, Engelbrecht and Terblanche (2019) from Stellenbosch University, a historically White-dominated institution, was published and later

retracted following a petition signed by thousands. The article sparked uproar in academic spaces as well as the public at large as numerous organisations and individuals engaged in critical discussions around the persistent structural racism. The article reported on the findings of the study which suggested that South African Coloured women were of “an increased risk of low cognitive functioning as they present with low education levels and unhealthy lifestyle behaviors” (Niewoudt et al., 2019 p.321.).

Editorials and open letters to authors and publishers argued against the racist ideological underpinnings, flawed methodologies the study adopted and the perpetuation of harmful and stereotypical treatment of Coloured women (Boswell, 2019). The authors ignored the latest data from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2019) depicting economic activities, labour force, poverty and indigency; however, they cited incorrect and outdated sources to support their argument which is embedded in racism. The article was particularly important to reflect on as it was, firstly, reported to be of scientific merit, and had undergone peer-review processes and ethical regulations stipulated by Stellenbosch University. The University was widely criticized for evidently overlooking racial essentialism and perpetuating racial ideologies that drove the apartheid regime (Grange, 2019). Secondly, the article drew from colonial stereotypes of African women, specifically South African Coloured women, as being intellectually deficient. Lastly, the study employed its flawed methodology, the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA), an instrument commonly used in psychological testing. The instrument was previously shown to yield fundamentally flawed results, thus contributing to the existing challenges related to inappropriate psychological testing on the South African population (Boswell, 2019).

Against the backdrop of the diverse demands made by the South African practice, the psychology profession has progressively raised concerns regarding the training of psychologists and that their training may no longer be adequate or congruent with the evolving psychological needs of the majority of the population (Viljoen, Beuks & Louw, 1999). With 27-years into democracy which is underpinned by the Constitution (1996) of the Republic of South Africa that provides for the eradication of racial ideologies, the efficacy of psychological testing remains a highly contested phenomenon (Foxcroft, 2011). Scholars who have critiqued psychological testing argue against the limited value for a culturally diverse population (Laher & Cockcroft, 2014). The marked disparities still existing in South Africa pose a challenge for practicing psychologists whose sole mandate is to provide well-being for all South Africans. Racial issues continue to arise and impact tremendously on the experiences of South Africans

which calls for psychologists to acquire the necessary tools and skills to address the society's social ills (Thusi, 2019).

#### 2.4 The evolving history of psychology in South Africa

The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAF, 2011) and Cooper and Nicholas (2012), concur on the point that despite psychology gaining prevalence as one of the most widely studied disciplines at South African universities, it still faces a challenge bordering on identity crisis. The ASSAF (2011) further highlighted the view that by virtue of being at the Southern point of the African continent, South Africa is situated in what is regarded as the gateway to the sub-Saharan African region. The country represents an amalgam of diverse cultures, although the Western influences are still reminiscent in most spheres of the society which arguably drives the maintenance of disparities between Blacks and Whites (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Cooper, 2015).

Although practicing psychologists have largely continued to perform more or less the same function since their commencement of the profession a century ago, the profession has arguably not been subjected to progressive socio-economic change (Fouche, 2015; Viljoen et al., 1999). This is particularly true about South African psychologists in the recent years, as psychological services have started to gain much recognition within the health system. Psychological services such as psychological assessments and psychotherapy are gradually becoming accessible to the previously disadvantaged groups, including those in remote areas, a situation which has translated to the broadening of practitioners' competencies. The growing recognition and accessibility of mental health services among the majority of the population then highlight the need to render the relevant psychological services (Viljoen et al., 1999). Pillay, Ahmed and Bawa (2013) state that psychology in South Africa has been confronted with hurdles. For instance, the profession has continuously faced challenges related to the nature of psychological practice and its relevance to the broader South African community, as it was argued that it lacked inclusiveness, thus creating barriers impeding mental health-seeking behaviour (Pillay et al., 2013).

According to Pillay and Nyandeni (2020), clinical psychology in South Africa is a profession that has been in existence for more than 60 years. Being the statutory body regulating the training and practice of psychologists in South Africa, the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) registered its first clinical psychologists in 1956 (HPCSA, 2000 as cited in Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021). Thus, South Africa under the HPCSA board has been training psychologists since the 1950s and the formal training entailed a master's degree with



coursework and a 12-month supervised internship which was officially introduced in the 1970s. The training model currently being used throughout South Africa has the same as the one used in the 1970s except for the duration of the supervised internship which was adjusted from 18 months to 12 months in a specialist mental facility (Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021).

Consistent with the apartheid policies, the training of psychologists, as with other professions, was reserved for White students and when Black students started gaining access to the profession, their numbers were stringently restricted (Pillay & Siyothula, 2008; Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021). These restrictions were intertwined with the complex dynamics of the apartheid structures and laws which placed the country's universities at the forefront of the racist exclusionary mechanism (Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021). Job reservation was reportedly one of the most dominant components of the apartheid era, and it consequently affected every aspect of life for the Black South Africans who were on the system's receiving end (Ngcobo & Edwards, 2008). Pillay and Nyandeni (2021) have argued that the system encompassed the broader spectrum of education and social development policies that sought to keep people of colour on the margins of society as subordinates while promoting the development of White South Africans.

In an attempt to eradicate racial disparities, it was expected that more training opportunities would be afforded to Black Africans in order to proportionally represent the 80.7% majority population of 58.8 million people (Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021). Psychology is a powerful field underpinned by intuitive advancements and different ways of dealing with hypothesis, science, and practice. Moreover, psychology has continued to develop in correspondence with extensive social patterns and impacts (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2016). Studies exploring the subjective experiences of practicing and trainee psychologists, within South African context remains scarce in professional psychology literature. It was thus imperative for the study to delve into the manner in which different training institutions and regulatory bodies have attempted to redress the training imbalances. The studies were conducted with the aim of ensuring that the discipline's profile resonates with the majority that it intends to serve, and that its functional procedures and underpinning theoretical principles are congruent with the sociocultural systems of the people it serves (Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021).

In 2017, Professor Tholene Sodi of the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) voiced concerns regarding the shortage of psychologists in South Africa, adding that in a country characterised by high unemployment, violence and ongoing psychosocial stressors, the dire

shortage of psychologists in the public health sector is hazardous to health as most South Africans are confronted by stressful situations that require qualified experts such as psychologists (PsySSA, 2017). Statistics issued by the Health Systems Trust (HST), reports published in 2017 indicated that clinical psychologists working in the public sector were 2.75 per 10 000 population, with strategies being implemented to increase psychological service provision in rural primary healthcare centres (HST, 2017). Sodi (2017) further emphasised the progress South Africa has made according to the World Health Organization's Mental Health Atlas, statistics of efforts to increase the provision of mental health services is reportedly consistent with the forecasted statistics for developing countries.

Low Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) such as South Africa are estimated to have 0,24 psychologist per 100 000 population, the abovementioned statistics reported by HST are indicative of the efforts the country has made. The history of the discipline of psychology demands the constant vigilance and self-monitoring of any developments that seek to redress the strategies and mechanisms of the apartheid policies that were previously put in place to achieve the broader goals of equity and social justice within the professional spheres. Thus, Pillay and Nyandeni (2020) recommended that for the profession to achieve these goals, the current situation should be re-examined, and any progress made should be evaluated as the role of psychologists in addressing social change continues to be under-emphasized in South Africa. Pillay (2016) highlights that there is a loose relationship between the discipline of psychology and the current progressive politics that advocates social change. There is an urgent need to training the psychologists to adequately equip them with skills needed to address the various needs of the majority of South Africans.

## 2.5 Multiculturalism in counselling and psychotherapy

Johnston (2015) argued that in South Africa, culture has been conceptualised to embody multiple meanings and is often associated with race, poverty, inequality, and material deprivation. South Africa's socio-political history has significantly influenced the country's multifaceted cultural constructs. The apartheid regime, for instance, marginalised indigenous ethnic groups and privileged specific non-Black groups, a scenario that continues to affect the lives of many individuals today (Johnston, 2015). An exploration of past developments and a look into future perspectives resulted in Bhana, Petersen and RoCHAT (2007) conducting a study to ascertain the historical and contemporary facets contributing meaningfully to the development and advancement of the field of psychology in pre-apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa (Bhana et al., 2007). The study explored the brief history of psychology in South

Africa. The study found that before the 1990s, the apartheid government implemented numerous restrictive pieces of legislation on Blacks wishing to train or further their studies at historically White-controlled institutions. Such policies served to maintain the ideological rationale for establishing institutions that perpetuated racial segregation, providing different forms of training at tertiary level while reinforcing White supremacy (Bhana et al., 2007).

According to Thusi (2019), the provision of services to clients from diverse cultural backgrounds has proven to be a rather challenging task for most psychologists. Gallardo, Parham, Johnson and Carter (2009) posit that applied psychology is still struggling to effectively translate theory and discourse into non-Western cultures. For Helms (1994), multicultural competencies seek to improve the capacity of the psychologist to devise skills that would help their clients negotiate and navigate societal systems. Multicultural counselling in South Africa is regarded as a corrective measure that seeks to address the apartheid legacy and serves two functions, namely, the over-emphasized racial and ethnic differences and the under-emphasized universal culture of humanity as well as the recognition of individual and cultural diversity existing among groups of people arbitrarily classified on narrow racial lines (Ngcobo & Edwards, 2008).

Due to the political situation obtaining prior to the current democratically elected government in South Africa, most of the professions, including psychological services, experienced major imbalances with regard to the number of Blacks employed in relation to their White counterparts (Ngcobo & Edwards, 2008). Contrary to the general population dynamics, statistics indicate that the majority of the registered psychologists are Whites and consequently are, in most instances, insufficiently prepared to deal with clients who come from different cultural, ethnic, or home language groups exhibiting attitudes, beliefs and values that differ vastly from theirs (Ngcobo & Edwards, 2008).

## 2.6 Exploring the world of the known and the unknown

The training of novice psychologists must aim at meeting the multiple socio-political and transformational challenges as well as issues confronting the psychology profession in the country and many training programmes across universities (Gibson, Sandenbergh & Swartz, 2001). This, however, is emotionally challenging and difficult for the trainees especially during their first year of training in their clinical and counselling master's courses (Gibson et al., 2001). According to Skovholt (2012), the emotional reactions of a beginner in the field of psychology are considered timeless and essentially form part of the rite of passage into the practice of psychology. Trainee psychologists often find themselves treading between

enthusiasm and insecurity as the beginning of their career could be very exciting and coupled with the eagerness to learn more about helping others. Yet, as Skovholt (2012) maintains, the same experience may also cause a feeling of insecurity about the knowledge of therapy procedures and one's ability to succeed. Trainees enter into the world of the known and the unknown as they start their practicing career, a personally unexplored wilderness which provokes feelings of uncertainty and anxiety (Skovholt, 2012).

Pursuing a career as a mental health practitioner can be both emotionally demanding and rewarding, which presents a challenge for the trainees in terms of grasping in their first year of training (Harris, Cumming and Campbell, 2006). The optimal well-being of mental health practitioners is crucial as it is directly linked to the quality-of-service delivery and consequently job satisfaction (Harris et al., 2006). Being a psychologist can be fulfilling but demanding and stressful, psychologists are expected to be compassionate and considerate; they should be able to contain their emotional reactions even with revealed trauma and compelling emotion, and they ought to be profoundly delicate to individuals and nature (Owen-Pugh, 2010).

These elements can, however, make psychologists genuinely depleted, which can prompt the disintegration of their service to clients. The primary goal of helping post-graduate students of Psychology is to first understand the role of stress and to work towards addressing their needs (Myers et al., 2012). Moreover, it is equally important to monitor trainees' stress levels during the course of training, identify variables that contribute to the stress and determine factors that may be targeted to help eradicate stress amongst Clinical and Counselling Psychology students, an aspect which the current study seeks to explore further (Myers et al., 2012).

Mental health professionals have identified numerous aspects related to clients' behaviours, roles and specific personal vulnerabilities are reported as stressful factors (Jordaan, Spangenberg, Watson&Fouche, 2007). Stress-related problems amongst trainee psychologists are relatively common and often involve being confronted with the inherent uncertainty surrounding their competencies (Gerber & Hoelson, 2011). This often relates to the expectation of psychologists who should be able to assist their clients managing stress and uncertainty in their lives (Gerber & Hoelson, 2011). The implication of this revelation is that psychologists ought to acquire the relevant level of knowledge, qualities and skills during their training. The predominant reason for the severe stress trainees experience derives from the inherent uncertainty of their professional work (Skovholt and Ronnestand, 2003). This even applies to

the South African context as psychologists are required to practise in highly complex socio-political and systematic contexts (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003; Gerber & Hoelson, 2011).

Interestingly, the literature reveals a close correlation between burnout and psychological stress; there were increased stress levels amongst trainees and practicing psychologists. Currently, overwhelming evidence points to stress-related problems amongst practicing and trainee psychologists (Jordaan et al., 2007). Although they are related, burnout is a different construct from stress (Jenaro, Flores & Arias, 2007). Kumary and Baker (2008) reported that trainees in counselling-related professions are particularly vulnerable to stress and burnout due to the multiple academic and clinical demands placed on them. Burnout, as conceptualised by Simionato and Simpson (2018), is a type of stress associated with feelings of exhaustion, disconnection and self-doubt deriving from emotionally involving work of helping professions.

Studies have found that burnout amongst clinicians has been reported to have defeatist consequences such as distancing oneself from clients and disbelief in the effectiveness of treatment (Kristensen et al., 2006; Richardson et al., 2020). The literature identified these problem areas, noting that they are not exclusive to senior practicing psychologists as they are also present amongst trainee psychologists. Moreover, trainees experiencing burnout during training were also discovered to exhibit lower compassion for others, which most likely impacts on the counselling process as well as high anxiety and stress (Beaumont, Durkin, Martin & Carson, 2016).

## 2.5 Untoward effects of psychological stress on trainees' perceived competencies

Truell (2001) has indicated that the prevalence of trainee psychologists who, over the years, have reported the pressure to perform well academically have negatively impacted on their therapeutic skills as students and experienced feelings of inadequacy which led to negative psychological outcomes. While most trainees do not present with clinically significant levels of psychological distress or impairment, many trainee psychologists have reported symptoms of depression and burnout (Brooks, Holtum & Lavender, 2002). In addition to the intensive demands of the training programmes, these impairments were found to negatively impact on clinical performance. A study conducted by Humphrey, Crino and Wilson (2017) found the symptoms of depression as primarily hindering the development of clinical competencies, as opposed to stress and anxiety which reportedly had a minimal impact on competency development.

High levels of anxiety and stress are perceived to be inevitable aspects of training (Hassan El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh & Bufka, 2006). These findings significantly contributed to the pivotal exploration of vulnerability factors that may hinder coping, leading to negative outcomes such as burnout and depression amongst trainees (Hassan El-Ghoroury et al., 2006). Literature dating back to the early 1980s identified the psychological strain associated with dealing with clients on a face-to-face basis as the most important antecedent of burnout. The majority of studies have concentrated on mental health professionals, with trainees in such professions even being more potentially vulnerable to stress and burnout (Halewood & Tribe, 2003).

Training in general has been commonly associated with stress; however, it has been suggested that specific training programmes such as training in psychology as a career reportedly consists of intrinsic stressors (Kumary and Baker, 2008). Arguably, training in psychology presents multiple academic and clinical demands to student practitioners, often leading to early onset of self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy (Kumary & Baker, 2008). A survey conducted by Glickauf-Hughes and Mehlman (1995) demonstrated that trainee psychologists frequently struggle with insecurities that relate to being good enough. Szymanska (2002) argued that although self-doubt is to be expected during training in psychology, this however, does not alleviate its negative effect upon trainees. Kumary and Baker (2008) further stipulate that inasmuch as trainees frequently experience the negative effects, this should not warrant that they become inherent constituents of the training process in psychology.

## 2.6 A call for psychological adaptation

Professional training in psychology requires psychological adaption of the trainees who are expected to fully engage with the pre-qualification training programme at the post-graduate level (Kuyken, Peters, Powers & Lavender, 2003). In light of the above-mentioned statement, several scholars have indicated that for trainees to have the competencies needed for the professional training, they ought to be trained in how to adapt psychologically and approach learning. Research relating to how trainees adapt to the demands of master's and doctoral programmes is scant, with their theoretical frameworks being too limited to foster an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Kuyken et al., 2003). There has been an emergent need for research not only to identify the factors that affect trainees' but also to understand how these trainees' professional functioning in the domains of work adjustment and learning to enable the systems they function in to promote optimal learning and work environments (Kuyken et al., 2003).

Studies on the psychology professional training programmes have gradually, but with very slow progress, started documenting the effects of these trainings on the psychological wellness of trainees (Kumary & Bakerr, 2008; Pakeham & Stafford-Brown, 2012; Richardson, Trusty & George, 2020). The above-mentioned authors have concluded that the training programmes strongly correlate with the pressure related to balancing personal life with various roles that trainee psychologists face (Kumary et al., 2008; Pakeham et al & Stafford-Brown, 2012; Richardson et al., 2020). Often, these pressures have been found to induce stressors associated with being evaluated, more specifically in relation to psycho-therapeutic competencies other inter-related sources of stressors are attributed to academic workload, clinical placements, personal stress and programme organisation (Kumary & Baker, 2008).

### 2.7 Maladaptive perfectionism in the face of psychological adaption

A study on post-graduate trainees in psychology reported that many trainees in the profession identified themselves as '*obsessive overachievers*', an otherwise maladaptive perfectionism, which might have influenced their experiences of the training characterised by ambiguity (Richardson et al., 2020). This is not limited to the mere training process but the entire practice of psychology as most psychologists are confronted with ambiguity on a daily basis, right from symptom presentation, not meeting diagnostic criteria to ethical dilemmas. Dealing with ambiguity can even be an adverse experience for trainee practitioners, who must learn to cope with not having all the answers to all the problems confronting them (Pica, 1998; Richardson et al., 2020). Because of this, the learning process becomes debilitating, creating a vicious cycle of constant anxiety, self-doubt and low self-efficacy (Pica, 1998; Powers et al., 2015).

In addition to the pressures emanating from trying to balance personal life with various other roles trainees have, most students reportedly face stressors relating to the reality of being evaluated, specifically when conducting counselling or therapy as stipulated by Richardson et al. (2020). The revelation that most trainees in psychology report being '*obsessive overachievers*', and the unpleasant process of acquiring therapeutic knowledge and skills that are not off a textbook may often cause persistent self-doubt, which consequently impedes the building of therapeutic relationships and actively engaging in supervisory processes (Schwartz-Mette, 2009; Richardson et al., 2020).

### 2.8 A pathway to mental "wealth" amongst trainee psychologists

Despite the fact that a considerable number of studies have been conducted on the experiences of trainees and psychologists. Literature has generally concentrated on either the training programmes or the practice's negative impact on qualified psychologists rather than exploring

new opportunities or strategies that exist for trainees to grow and thus cope with the inherent uncertainty and stress associated with the profession (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; Gerber & Hoelson, 2011). The field of psychology is distinct for its aloofness, which may be an anticipated challenge as the nuances of the training are unpredictable.

In contrast, other scholars have called for uncertainty to be perceived differently rather than the current negative connotations such as the fearfulness it holds (Gordon, 2003). (Gerber & Hoelson, 2011) suggested that uncertainty should in turn be regarded as a natural manifestation that stimulates creativity. It is further highlighted that being in a position to view uncertainty positively is a crucial determinant of professional maturity (Jennings et al., 2003). Uncertainty has also been closely associated with curiosity and exploratory behaviours which extend to the notion of curiosity being an interactional phenomenon that is influenced by numerous interrelated systematic factors which include personality developments and contextual factors (Jennings et al., 2003; Kashdan & Silvia, 2009; Gerber & Hoelson, 2011). Engelbrecht (2004) argued that psychologists in particular are vulnerable to stress inasmuch as they promote self-care and stress management practices among their clients, as they scarcely heed their own advice.

## 2.9 Professionally growing into the field of psychology

*“Feelings of self-doubt, insecurity, and uncertainty about one’s effectiveness are among the most frequently endorsed and consistently reported hazards of the psychotherapeutic profession, regardless of the experience level of the practitioner”* (Mahoney, 1997 as cited in Thériault, Gazzola & Richardson, 2009, p.106). It is important to note that while the developmental journey for psychologists often spans across their lifetime, a study conducted by Kuyken et al. (2003) indicated that trainees generally report increased problems with depression and interpersonal difficulties throughout the course of their training. The study reported on the factors that were found to contribute significantly to psychological adaption such as self-awareness, supervision, work-life balance, a significant relationship and personal values (Kuyken et al., 2003). Richardson et al. (2020) concur with the aforesaid and further emphasised the notion that the commencement of the journey is the most anxiety-provoking experience and ought to be used as a benchmark for future research on trainees’ experiences.

Konstantinou (2015) stipulated that the positive outcomes a clinical and counselling psychologist experience at the onset of internship work can be fundamental, and such attitudes include the desire for improvement in their chosen field, the need to absorb as much practical experience as possible and to attain additional training that they may not have received in a



formal educational setting. Additionally, completing ones' internship at a reputable institution plays a significant role in the long-term perceived pay-off in career-building. At the start of the internship, trainee psychologists tend to become more conscious of the level of their practice-based competencies. Ronnestad and Skovholt (2013) ascertained that intern become cognisant of their limitations when faced with diverse clients, group sessions and presentations, transpiring as negative factors that student psychologists face when they are exposed to the realities of clinical practice. According to Konstantinou (2015), trainee psychologists experience discontentment and discouragement when their preparation has failed to sufficiently equip them.

Ronnestad and Skovholt (2013) stated that discontentment with their preparation also influences a feeling of dissatisfaction with the self as a psychologist. On the one hand, recognizing restrictions in clinical practice can bring about approaches of insufficiency or ineffectiveness. On the other hand, approaches of ineffectiveness can stimulate intern psychologists to participate in auxiliary professional development workshops beyond the internship itself as a means to surmount their self-identified restrictions in their practice. Similarly, Konstantinou (2015) noted that interns who had precise, explicit and elevated expectations of their internship experience a robust sense of discontent when their preparation was unable to meet their own expectations. Interns who felt they were deprived of any precise or clear anticipation of the training appeared to have circumvent such discontent and convey greater fulfillment deriving from the training programme, this often leads to aggravated stress among intern psychologists.

## 2.10 Professional development as an imperative milestone for novice psychologists

Kluck, O'Connor-Pennuto and Hartman (2011) The phrase 'professional development' refers to the training and guidance within the bounds of transitioning into the profession and the practice of psychology (Kluck et al., 2011). The internship programme in psychology as a process of socializing trainees into real world practices. Kaslow and Rice (1986) have also referred to professional development as 'professional adolescence' as it signifies the developmental period in which trainees are confronted with challenges as they struggle to establish their professional identity as they make a transition from student to independent psychologists.

Internship is arguably designed to provide interns with a predetermined sequence of training experiences that seek to ensure that trainees receive adequate guidance in professional development, which is crucial in fostering the transition into professional practice (Kluck et

al., 2011). Furthermore, professional development takes precedence and is considered the most important component of the internship training experience as it aims to complement the trainees in their acquisition of clinical skills development, namely assessment, as well as therapeutic and community engagement (Kluck et al., 2011). This echoes the importance of understanding the professional needs of trainee psychologists as being essential in maximising the utility of the training programme (Kluck et al., 2011).

Skovholt (2012) draws on a distinctively different perspective of professional development; one that is not only limited to structural and formal effects of training but that which encompasses broader facets than those undergoing the training experience. The profession of psychology that requires one to commit themselves to being helpful to others and that is what is at the centre of the profession. As trainee psychologists undergo training, they open themselves up to a bounty of uncertainties, stretching experiences, new perspectives and new sets of skills (Skovhol, 2012). The training equips them with the basic knowledge of the steps taken for one to become a helping and human development practitioner and acquiring such knowledge entails entering the unknown profession while enjoying the benefits of being in a helping profession and anticipating an effective professional career of providing service to others. In this regard, professional development extends to cultivating a style and skills level that seeks to optimize the human development of those clients that present for psychotherapy or counselling (Skovholt, 2012).

Deuster (2009) characterizes the essential goal of internships as involving giving students a chance to test capacities towards specific material or vocational opportunities for the future. Temporary positions and helpful instruction programmes give students the chance to apply learned educational material to vocational settings in the real world (Pillay et al., 2013). Students who are exposed to experiential learning are at an advantageous position in terms of widening their future vocational openings through on-site networking and setting up working associations with their managers so that they can take on additional roles once their internship is over. These connections and opportunities cannot exclusively be fostered by academic courses; thus, they can be developed by joining the information picked up from these courses with real-life applications in workplace settings (Pillay et al., 2013).

Practicing as a novice psychologist within a South African context can be extremely demanding, the practice for the newly appointed intern psychologists may bring about anxiety as trainees start getting cases and have to sit in a session with clients (Eagles, Hayes & Long,

2009; Ally, 2016). Kottler and Swart (2004) expressed the view that the intense periods of depression and anxiety commonly occur among psychology trainees. This is often due to attempts to protect themselves from the debilitating effects of mental health activities while trying to manage the pressures of academic, personal, and clinical training (Kottler & Swart, 2004). Indeed, the training process in psychology involves an intense process where status will be grappling and negotiating with personal, social and professional identity (Kottler & Swart, 2004; Ally, 2016).

### 2.11 The mediation of intrapersonal and interpersonal resources

Individual resilience is attributes to individuals' that allow one to withstand, adjust to, and recover from adverse events and conditions (Bonanno, 2004; Prince-Embury, 2011). Customarily, individual resilience was conceptualised as a peculiar characteristic appropriate and noteworthy to people who, despite extraordinary difficulties, had continued to thrive (Masten, 2011). Due to the extensive research done on resilience, current models of individual resilience regarded it as an essential adjustment framework found in most individuals (Luthar & Barkin, 2012). Research proposes that individual resilience is a multifaceted competency emerging from three basic formative frameworks: a feeling of authority, a feeling of relatedness, and a passionate reactivity (Masten, 2011).

The feeling of authority refers to an intrinsic sense of interest that drives assumptions regarding individual adequacy and is considered as the source of critical thinking abilities (Prince-Embury, 2011). The feeling of elated self-esteem strongly shapes an anticipation of controllability, which thus impacts on cognisant reactions (such as adapting procedures) to stressors (Bandura, 1993; Prince-Embury, 2011). Moreover, research reveals that the feeling of dominance is powerfully identified with mental prospering, fulfillment in life, and positive effect (Saklofske et al., 2013). The feeling of relatedness alludes to a person's degree of perceived social help and sense of identity in relation to others. Research shows that the feeling of relatedness functions as a buffer against pressure and advances the utilisation of versatile adaptation systems (Prince-Embury, 2011). Evidence indicates that the feeling of relatedness is unequivocally and decidedly connected with alluring mental results, for example, fulfillment with life, positive effect, and mental prospering (Prince-Embury, 2011; Saklofske et al., 2013).

The professionals who participated in a study conducted by Adamson, Beddoe & Davys (2014) strongly emphasized a multi-faceted and progressive mindfulness that stressed the social and relevant attributes of their experience. Experienced professionals in Grant and Kinman (2013) investigation alluded to their capacities to deal with the inescapable intra-personal and inter-

personal emotional complexities characteristic of their work. This required them to be genuinely tuned in to support clients while overseeing and controlling their own feelings. They, likewise, viewed strength as an 'on-going' progression, requiring long haul steadiness, tending to see the advantages in increasing terms, with flexibility being perceived more frequently in a more inter-actional sense, connected to work with service clients and professional execution.

This situation manifested in Adamson et al., (2014) study where the accomplished professionals all the more promptly observed past their own needs to concentrate on the necessities of their clients. They noticed that the significance of a sound psychological practice with positive results for clients was closely related to their own versatility as specialists with viable and skillful work with others as a noteworthy portion of flexibility. While thinking about methodologies to improve strength, experienced staff communicated their perspectives more self-assuredly than students. For example, they considered supervision to be a central option to be requested. Similarly, a study conducted by (Adamson et al., 2014) called attention to the ability of experienced specialists to look for, find and utilise supervision of great quality and the 'right' sort of supervisor. This would provide individual guidance to each young professional, thus allowing the supervisor to provide in-depth feedback based on an individual professional's resilience.

### 2.12 An Africentric worldview of psychological adjustment

Worldviews differ across cultural groups and often function as the determinants of how people perceive, engage in thought processes and experience the world (Myers (2008). An Africentric worldview refers to the worldview of people originating from an African lineage and that which consists of values, belief systems and behaviours of an African heritage (Belgrave & Allison, 2006; Neblett, Seaton, Hammond & Townsend, 2010). The African heritage serves as a blueprint for Africans and often contributes to the meaning-making processes of the world as well as their adaptation to life circumstances (Buttler, 1992; Neblett et al., 2010). An Africentric worldview is, according to Neblett et al. (2010), embedded in numerous dimensions, particularly *spirituality* which speaks to the belief in a higher power or being *collectivism* as it relays to the emphasis on cooperation. *Time orientation* refers to the equal importance attributed to the past, present, future and time flexibility; *sensitivity to affect and emotional cues* being the essence of acknowledging other peoples' emotional and affective states. Lastly, the of balance and harmony with nature thought to be the balance between one's mental, physical and spiritual states (Neblett et al., 2010).

The above-listed dimensions were reported to have been the sustenance of the many enslaved Africans who held onto them as a means of survival in oppressive environments and were said to have been passed down from generations to generations (Asante, 2003; Grills, 2004; Neblett et al., 2010). Although an Africentric worldview deeply immerses itself in these dimensions, it is important not to assume that deviations from its own worldview are considered disorders or psychological dysfunctions. Rather, an Africentric worldview, particularly within the field of psychology, inherently invites the exploration of unfamiliar and/or unexplored pathways of indigenous healing knowledge that still exists within the African contemporary societies with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the training experiences of trainee psychologists (Akbor, Jackson & Sears, 1992 as cited in Neblett et al., 2010).

The Africentric worldview plays a significant role in ones' psychological adjustment (Baldwin and Bell, 1985) and (Jackson & Sears, 1992). Africentric worldview and Black university students', an experiential study, revealed close correlation with lower depression level when compared to other worldviews students ascribed to (Millet's (1993). Hatter and Otten (1998) formally examined the Africentric worldview among Black university students in predominantly White universities reported to have significant links between the worldview and positive academic, personal and emotional adjustment. Currently, there are very limited studies that have reviewed or replicated the strong and progressive correlations between an Africentric worldview and positive psychological adjustment.

### 2.13 Conceptual framework: The transaction theory of stress of coping

The conceptual framework a study adopts should attempt to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied, which in this case is the experiences of trainee psychologists during their early stages of professional training (Beckley, 2012). Due to the generally observed paucity in literature regarding stress management interventions for professional psychology training, trainees have become inherently competitive. Consequently, this had led to the inability to respond effectively to stressful work and personal demands (Ally, 2016). Moreover, the exploration of the influences of outcomes associated with emotional stress and coping strategies is undoubtably overdue. Thus, the study has adopted the psychological stress and coping conceptual framework as an important explorative tool used to make meaningful significant contributions to an Africentric worldview as well as understanding the push and pull factors of a person-environment relationship with each students' experiences and subsequent perception of the training and preparedness for professional roles (Filander, 2015).

The increasing correlations suggested one possible mechanism that could be attributed to the reported findings, delineating how dimensions of an Africentric worldview may positively influence psychological adjustment through buffering or moderating effects caused by stressful events (Myers, 1996). The set of values and beliefs one identifies with, may for instance, act as a buffer between stressful life events and resultant poor health by means of reducing its' impact of stress (Myers, 1998; Neblett et al., 2010). With the goal of preparing trainee psychologists to function and grow effectively within the psychology profession in the South African context, the study has adopted Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping as a conceptual framework underpinning the study. The conceptualisation of stress and coping in the current paper is based on the transaction theory of stress and coping proposed by Lazarus and his colleagues (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This conceptual framework was found to arguably be the most useful and appropriately applied lenses for understanding the potential positive nature of an Africentric worldview. The transactional theory of stress and coping theory places specific emphasis on process-orientation as well as relational meaning an individual constructs containing a stress stimulus that stems from a person-environment relationship, considered as bi-directional and constantly evolving (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Neblett et al., 2010).

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress refers to the interaction of several variables involving a particular relationship between a person and the environment that is appraised by the person as being taxing or exceeding coping resources and endangering well-being. Coping as conceptualised by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) refers to a multifaceted process that involves behavioural and cognitive responses thought to manage specific demands assessed as stressful. It consists of two pivotal focal facets namely *problem-focused* as it relates to the attempts to engage, act, or change the actual stressor and *emotion-focused*, which resonates with the attempts to modulate emotions associated with the stressor.

The transaction theory seeks to illustrate how individuals are constantly appraising different stimuli within their environment. The appraisal process accumulates emotions and in cases where the appraisal was considered a threat, challenge or endangering (stressor), the resultant distress prompts coping strategies to eradicate the impact or attempt to directly address the stressor (Folkman, 1997; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus, 1990; Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman & Gruen, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping processes produce an outcome, a change to the person-environment relationship, which is reappraised as

being favourable, unfavourable or resolved further influencing the emotional life (Folkman & Lazarus, 1998; Biggs et al., 2017). A favourable and/or resolved outcome induces positive emotions while unfavourable and/or unresolved outcomes induce distress, provoking the individual to consider further coping options to attempt to resolve the stressor (Biggs et al., 2017). According to this perspective, the concept of stress is perceived as a transaction between the individual and the situation as opposed to it being viewed as an outcome of single factors that occur in isolation. Several studies have demonstrated that stress is an inevitable by-product of the psychology profession (Craig & Sprang, 2010 as cited in Felton, Coates & Christopher, 2013).

#### 2.13.1 Cognitive appraisal

The primary features of the Transactional theory are cognitive, appraisal and coping, these have been the core fundamentals of the subsequently revisions of the Transactional theory, proposing that the intensity of a stress reaction is attributable to the mediating role of the appraisal and cognitive processes through which meaning is attached to the event or stimuli (Boyd, Lewin & Sager, 2009; Dewe & Cooper, 2007; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Oliver & Brough, 2002; Biggs et al., 2017). This perspective also argues that appraisal must be considered as an important node because of its ability to determine how an individual chooses to cope with a particular stressor. The appraisals of person-environment transactions incorporate two sets of forces: (a) an individual's personal agenda, including their values, goals and beliefs and (b) the environmental factors such as demands and availability of resources. The variations in the individual's agenda and the complex and ambiguous nature of the environment thus gives meaning to the many variations of appraisals people make from the same environmental contexts (Lazarus, 1999; Biggs et al., 2017). The Transactional theory has highlighted the importance of considering the cognitive process that is engaged as individuals appraise the contextual circumstances. In this regard, the internal cognitive processes such as appraisal interact with the external environment to initiate responsive coping strategies for the stressor to be successfully resolved (Lazarus, 1999).

#### 2.13.2 Primary and secondary appraisal

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) delineated the two forms of appraisals, namely primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal refers to the meaning attached to a specific person-environment transaction, determining the significance of the transaction to an individual's well-being. These transactions can be further distinguished as being *benign-positive* (producing

a positive effect on one's well-being), *irrelevant* (being of no significance to one's well-being), or *stressful* (signifying possible harm or loss, threat or challenge). As the primary appraisals resonate with the meaningfulness of a person-environment interaction to one's sense of well-being. Secondary appraisals are in turn what can be done to manage the stressor together with its resultant distress (Dewe & Cooper, 2007; Biggs et al., 2017). The second appraisal is enacted when certain transactions are deemed stressful and involve cognitive processes that help the individuals to identify and evaluate their coping resources (self-efficacy), situational variables and coping styles (Dewe & Cooper, 2007). The overall appraisal processes as elaborated above serve to illustrate that an individual's stress reaction is significantly influenced by the complex, dynamic processes that require the simultaneous interchange of primary and secondary appraisals (Dewe & Cooper, 2007).

Numerous bodies of research evidence corresponded with the mediating role of cognitive appraisal that transpires between situational or individual resources and coping as well as the mediating role of coping between situational or individual resources and outcomes (Dewe & Cooper, 2007). A more recent study by Nicholls, Polman and Levy (2012) indicated support for the relationship between threat, challenge appraisals and unpleasant and pleasant emotions, respectively. These associations resultantly impacted on the coping and performance and satisfaction outcomes. Moreover, literature presented thus far concurs that an individual's appraisal of an event significantly influences their resultant emotions, coping strategies and successive outcomes (Biggs et al., 2017).

Lazarus (1966) has indicated how emotional stress is caused by an interchange and relationship between intrapsychic processes and environmental factors which evolve over times and situation. Stress is often connoted to a specific emotion such as fear, anxiety, anger or depression as stipulated by Lazarus (1966). All professions have the capability to induce stress, and while the practice of psychology can be extremely gratifying, it contains extensive demands and stressful components that could be detrimental to individuals (Craig & Sprang, 2010). Literature has indicated how stress is an inevitable by-product of the therapeutic profession, the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping has helped understand the shift in focus towards stress over the years, as the interest of a variety of applied and academic disciplines developed (Craig & Sprang, 2010; Ally, 2016).



## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Chapter introduction

A research methodology comprehensively delineates the manner in which the researcher may intend to approach a phenomenon, particularly through studying what he or she may believe can be known and articulates the areas of study the research paper presents which are influenced by the research questions and objectives that the study aims to fulfill (Neuman, 2006; Terre Blanche, Durrhiem & Painter, 2012). The current chapter provides an extensive description of the research methodology as it seeks to stimulate a deeper understanding and take heed of the plight of trainee psychologists, focusing on their experiences during the course of their professional training.

As the research methodology seeks to produce research outcomes that can inform training programmes, reflecting on the systemic needs required to adequately address the emotional and psychological stress that novice psychologists endure. It is hoped that findings from this study will guide programmes in finding alternate ways of alleviating anxiety and stress invoked by the master's professional training (Eagle, Haynes & Long, 2007; Ally, 2016). In this regard, the study intends to stimulate higher learning institutions and internship placement sites to be more cognisant of the factors that influence trainees' prospects and precautions needed to effectively work in professional spaces (Donati & Watts, 2005 as cited in Eagle et al., 2007). Lastly, the chapter extends the discussion to the research paradigm, the strategy used to select participants, method of collection and analysis of data.

### 3.2 Research aims and objectives

In addition to understanding the required professional developmental tasks that trainee psychologists need to master, the overall research question of the study is: What mediating factors influence the desired growth and perceived barriers to trainee psychologists in the University of KwaZulu-Natal master's programme?

Contextual factors are embedded in individuals' lived experiences and translate to, if unresolved, multifaceted complexities of the training process that are arguably subjective to trainee psychologists. In this regard, the current research study provides an exploration of what trainee psychologists perceive as prerequisites to prepare them for their professional roles as intern psychologists. The following research aims and objectives that seek to guide the research study were formulated:

1. To understand the perceived emotional, and psychological challenges experienced by trainee psychologists during the course of their first year of master's training.
2. To explore the effects that perceived emotional, and psychological challenges have on their personal and professional development as trainee psychologists throughout the training process.
3. To explore coping mechanisms employed by trainee psychologists to eradicate the undesirable impact of perceived significant, emotional, and psychological challenges on their trajectory of becoming practicing psychologists.
4. To generate recommendations for the trainee psychologist on how the perceived significant, emotional, and psychological challenges can be improved.

### 3.3 Research design

A qualitative research design refers to the spectrum of terms that inform research methods that aim to describe and give meaning to the different life experiences and social contexts of each individual in the study without quantifiable procedures (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). According to Keyes (2002), a one-time standardised psychological assessment attempting to capture '*life events*' may not be comprehensive enough to entirely reflect one's experiences and views. The current study is based on the premises that a qualitative inquiry is the most effective when exploring issues from various standpoints while allowing multiple facets of a phenomenon to emerge and be understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The research questions and subsequent aims and objectives suggest a starting point in developing a congruent research design as they provide fundamental cues about a phenomenon that a researcher seeks to explore (Berry & Otley, 2004; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Yin, 2012 as cited in Wahyuni, 2012).

Qualitative research methods refer to a type of scientific research that seeks to answer research questions through the systematic use of a predefined set of procedures. The qualitative method is a flexible collection of data that produces findings that were not otherwise determined in advance which, however, may be generalised beyond the immediate boundaries of the study

(Bagozzi & Exchange, 2006). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) ascertain that the term 'qualitative' infers an emphasis on the quality of entities, and processes and meanings that cannot be experimentally examined or measured. Hence, the qualitative research method was considered appropriate as the researcher sought to understanding the identified research problem from the perspectives of selected trainee psychologists.

A qualitative research method is used to obtain context specific emergent information relating to the values, views and behaviours that are relevant to the sub-group of the research study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merchant & Dupuy, 1996). Moreover, a qualitative approach gives a comprehensive and detailed description of the data obtained in an interactional manner, quite similar to counselling settings and is well suited for multicultural, non-prejudice inquiries (Bagozzi & Exchange, 2006; Wang, 2008). From a qualitative standpoint, subjective experiences of participants cannot be quantified. Rather, qualitative research is dependent on the interpretations and subjective processes the researcher arrives at as he or she engages closely with the data and immerses themselves in the exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions of the master's training offered at the respective campuses of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Lacey & Luff, 2001).

Qualitative studies, as opposed to their quantitative counterpart, are not that restrictive when exploring complex social interactional factors as qualitative researchers take interest in the manner in which individuals socially construct their own reality in untainted settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Ward (2008) has argued that qualitative strategies contribute meaningfully to producing rich empirical data. Further, they encourage participants to articulate themselves, sharing their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, the exploration of trainee psychologists' experiences and subsequent perceptions of their preparedness for professional roles. These conditions ensured that the researcher did not influence the research study outcomes (Golafshani, 2003).

According to Ally (2016), trainee psychologists often have professional developmental tasks that they are required to accomplish during specific phases of their training programme. Training within the South African context is argued to present with multiple complex challenges. This relates to a range of contextual factors such as the socio-economic disparities that exist in the country that have a significant impact on the therapeutic dynamics for trainee psychologists and psychologists in practice (Eagles et al., 2007). Further, Eagles et al. (2007) postulated that most trainee psychologists hail from a middle-class setting and are exposed to

predominantly urban backgrounds. The training process is multifaceted by cultural diversity and working with a variety of traumatic presenting problems within a context that is layered with colonialism, historical racism, violent crimes, and extreme poverty trigger personal anxieties in trainees (Eagles et al., 2007; Ally, 2016). For most psychologists, such experiences also negatively affect the trainees' abilities to adjust and may also stunt their professional growth (Eagles et al., 2007). In turn, the scarcity of trainee psychologists' experiences of the training programmes within the South African context has remained unexplored over the years and has warranted more attention for further investigations.

By adopting the transactional theoretical framework for stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the aim was to conceptually explore psychological stressors of trainee psychologists and coping strategies adopted to remediate those stressors (Ally, 2016). The current study intended to obtain an understanding and consider the plight of novice psychologists' by focusing on their experiences of the training process, and for psychology master's programmes to be better equipped to increase the prospects of future trainee psychologists to practice effectively within the South African context.

### 3.4 Research paradigm

A research paradigm as a set of fundamental assumptions and beliefs relating to how the world is perceived which in turn informs how people frame their thinking and further guides the behaviour of a researcher (Jonker & Pennink, 2010). Furthermore, Wahyuni (2012) ascertains that research paradigms are perceived worldviews that seek to address the philosophical dimensions of social sciences while presenting meaning about a social world that is interconnected to related sources of information and appropriate avenues of uncovering it.

The study adopted the interpretivist paradigm, according to this paradigm, reality is constructed by social actors and people's perception of it (Wahyuni, 2012). This approach is mindful of individuals' diverse backgrounds, assumptions and experiences that contribute to the continuous construction of reality existing in their broader social context through social interaction (Wahyuni, 2012). According to Neuman (2011), in attempts to understand the social world as emergent from experiences and subjective meanings assigned to it, the researcher engages and creates a dialogue with the identified participants. Thus, the exploration and understanding of any socially constructed world is done through the dynamic perceptions of both the researcher and the participants. Further, interpretivists believe that reality is constructed in individuals' minds rather than existing externally as a singular entity (Hansen, 2004). Social reality, in this regard, is viewed as amenable and denotes multiple perspectives

due to human worldviews and experiences that are subjective (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011).

The interpretivist approach was deemed relevant for the current study as it draws emphasis on how human interactions and language mould social worlds (Ulin et al., 2004). In this case, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) trained intern psychologists were the research participants. Interviews were done to elicit participants' views of the psychology master's training programme regarding issues of preparedness for professional practice. The interpretivist approach was used with the intent to deepen understanding, provide thick descriptions, and clear explanations of the experiences of research participants. Further, it informs the data analysis process (Polkinghorne, 2005).

### 3.5 Entry into the study site

The study was conducted at a South African institution of higher education called the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), between July and November 2019. The university consists of five cluster campuses situated in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province. Of the five campuses, two offer master's training programmes in Clinical and Counselling Psychology. These are Howard College and Pietermaritzburg campuses. The two campuses are situated in different districts. Howard College is in Durban, eThekweni district, which is found on the coastline of KZN, and Pietermaritzburg campus is in a city called Pietermaritzburg, Msunduzi district, in the Midlands region.

Although the two campuses are clusters of the UKZN institution, the psychology master's training programme offered in the respective campuses differ in more ways than one. UKZN was a preferred site for the study because the researcher was an enrolled student at the university, which facilitated the process of gaining access to the sample. An application to the University Registrar was processed and gatekeeper permission was obtained. The research participants being enrolled students at UKZN proved to be an advantageous as the process of obtaining permission from gatekeeper as well as ethical considerations was once-off. The study's ethics approval was obtained from the same institution by the University of KwaZulu-Natal HSSREC. The research site was deemed appropriate as all the participants recruited for the study were still registered for their master's degree in Clinical or Counselling Psychology and had access to the university, the researcher could use the campuses as a platform to meet and engage with the participants in collecting data.

### 3.6 Selection of participants

The study sought to recruit Clinical and Counselling trainee psychologists who were completing their internship and were trained at either of the two UKZN campuses. Non-probability sampling was conducted, a technique of purposive sampling which excludes random selection of participants was adopted (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2012). Purposive sampling was used in conjunction with snowball-sampling technique, which is a technique used for the purpose of identifying a specific sub-group of the research interest. As the researcher was identifying prospective participants for the study, she realised that most intern psychologists, whose first year of psychology training was at the UKZN in 2018 had either relocated to a different province or outside of the Durban region to pursue their second year of training (internship). Attempting to trace and recruit every intern that trained at the UKZN in 2018 would have been a practical challenge for the researcher, thus the selection criteria was that prospective participants had to have been within the Durban region at the time of data collection. Required to adapt to the challenges faced, the researcher relied greatly on peer-to-peer referral as this was more appropriate to help identify other intern psychologists that could be invited to be part of the study (Neuman, 2006; Etikan, Alkassim & Abubakar, 2016).

The inclusion criteria were that a participant was supposed to have completed first year of training (M1) at either Howard College or Pietermaritzburg campus, their second year of training and were registered at UKZN as collaborating institution and had worked as an intern psychologist minimum period of six months. The exclusion criteria was applicable to those who did not complete their first year of training at UKZN as well as those working as intern psychologists in internship sites outside of KwaZulu-Natal.

More times than not, participants in qualitative research are purposively selected with a clear intent to answer the research questions and achieve its' objectives (Guest, Namely & Mitchell, 2013). However, Guest et al. (2013) acknowledged that the purposive approach is fraught with challenges as it mostly relies on participants' availability and willingness to participate in the study. The researcher, being mindful of such challenges, approached intern clinical and counselling psychologists who were, at the time of recruitment, registered with the University of KwaZulu-Natal as their collaborative institution while they completed their internship. Nine potential participants were initially identified. Of the nine, six consented to participating in the study however five availed themselves for an interview. The study consisted of a total of five

participants, three were training to become clinical psychologists and the other two were training to become counselling psychologists.

### 3.7 Data collection method

From a qualitative research perspective, data collection encompasses the “how” part or manner in which the research material was obtained (Flick, 1998). A qualitative approach to collecting data was deemed suitable for the study because of its ability to provide information about the ‘human side’ of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this regard, in-depth interviews were adopted as a viable method of data collection. The interviews were semi-structured. Longhurst (2003) describes semi-structured interviews as verbal interactions in which the interviewer makes efforts to elicit certain information from another person by asking a set of open-ended questions. Inasmuch as the interviewer presented with predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews unfolded in a conversational way, allowing the participant the opportunity to explore the nuances of what they feel is essential regarding the topic of interest (Longhurst, 2003). A natural, conversational type of interview is commonly preferred in qualitative studies because of the manner in which it prompts both the foreseen and unforeseen responses providing a rich calibre of data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

### 3.8 Data collection instrument

A qualitative approach is the most appropriate in instances where the reality of people’s experiences is explored (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Thus, the initial phase of data collection entailed formulating a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C), generated from the identified knowledge gaps found in the literature (Longhurst, 2013). The goal was to better understand the effects of the master’s training programme on trainee psychologists’ perceived competencies. Semi-structured interviews are characterised by flexibility, which allows the interviewer to explore novel areas, produce enriched data and obtain in-depth information (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured one-on-one interviewing is an optimal method due to the nature of the data collected, which pertained to participants’ personal histories, perspectives and experiences. Moreover, during the interviewing process, participants were encouraged to speak openly about their subjective experiences of the training programme. The exploration of trainees’ experiences was to derive prominent indicators of what they attributed their professional competency to (Kvale, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually, with all the five intern psychologists using an interview guide. All the interviews were conducted in English as this was the indicated

language preference across all participants. The semi-structured interview guide used (see Appendix C) consisted of predetermined questions, and although participants were encouraged to speak at length about concerning issues, the use of an interview guide was to ensure that relevant topics were covered during the interviews (Longhurst, 2003). This aligned with attempts to meaningfully contribute to the study's research aims and objectives (Ngubane, 2019). According to Doody and Noonan (2013), most of the participants are willing to divulge information or their experiences if given guidance regarding the amount of detail they are expected to provide, hence probing plays a pivotal role in semi-structured interviews.

Prior to the interviewing process, participants were requested to read, understand and sign an informed consent form, which served as a formal written agreement between the researcher and the participant. On the form, the participants were further requested to give consent to audio recording of the interviews for the purpose of transcribing the interview content and use the transcripts for analysis. Furthermore, audio recording the interview helped strengthen the attunement and pacing of the interaction between the researcher and participant with the researcher being more attentive to issues to probe on and further prevented any distractibility that may have been as a result of notetaking (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002).

Each interview was scheduled to be approximately 45 to 60 minutes with a five-minute interval when needed. Follow-up interviews were conducted with all the participants involved in the first phase of data collection. The aim of the follow-up interviews was to establish how the training process had been after completing their 12-month internship. The interviews were conducted eight months after the first interviews. These interviews were aimed at further exploring the contextual factors that overtime impacted the research participant's trajectory in becoming a practicing psychologist. Hence, the follow-up interviews were guided by the individual's responses in the first interview, which then served as primary source of data. The interviews were set up on virtual communication platforms such as WhatsApp instant messaging and Zoom cloud meeting. Issues relating to confidentiality were reviewed, and verbal consent was granted prior to the commencement of each follow-up interview.

### 3.9 Pilot testing

A pilot study refers to a smaller version of the research study, which is conducted in preparation of the full-scale study. It can also be the pre-testing of a specific research instrument (Dikko, 2016). In objectively assessing the validity and reliability of the data collection instrument, the researcher first recruited three trainee psychologists that were on the verge of completing their first year of the same master's programme as those who would be targeted for the research



study. It is important to note that the sample group used in the pilot phase was not the exact sample population that was recruited for the study. The goal of the pilot study was to assess the efficacy and efficiency of the interview schedule. From the brief data collection using the semi-structured interview schedule, the researcher then evaluated whether the interview guide elicited information that significantly contributed towards answering the proposed research questions (Dikko, 2016). The trainee psychologists recruited as pilot participants were identified based on the shared characteristics to prospective participants for the study, thus piloting the interview schedule was met with opportunities for the researcher to refine and clarify any ambiguities and improve her interviewing skills.

### 3.10 Data analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis consists of numerous aims which are dependent on what a particular study intends to address. Qualitative sampling strategies do not seek to be statistically represent participants' responses. Therefore, reporting the findings in frequencies may be misleading and open to misinterpretations (Pope, Zieland & Mays, 2000). Rather, qualitative research uses analytical categories to describe and, meaningfully elaborate on phenomena (Pope et al., 2000). One of the current study's research aims was to describe the phenomenon of interest in greater depth. The phenomenon of interest which, in this instance, related to the perceived preparedness of UKZN trained novice psychologists for their newly acquired professional roles. This manner of analysing data allowed for the researcher to focus not only on the themes or patterns so as to compare and contrast the emergent constructs but to also explore the individualised phenomena as subjectively reported on the raw data.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis refers to a method that allows the researcher to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning or prominent themes within the emergent data set in detail. Moreover, thematic analysis is multifaceted, consisting of numerous approaches that were previously underreported and unacknowledged (Terry, Hayfield, Braun & Clark, 2017). In broad terms, thematic analysis is a method of analysing rich data through an exploration of themes that emerge as being important for the phenomenon being studied (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Two noticeable orientations in reporting the emergent themes were identified were the experiential and critical orientations to qualitative analysis. On the one hand, experiential orientation focuses on what participants think, feel and do which is often underpinned by a theoretical presumption that language reflects reality. On the other hand, critical orientation aims to interrogate dominant patterns of meaning and theoretically understand the language of

creating as opposed to merely reflecting reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry et al., 2017). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme recognises a meaning patterned across participants' responses within a data set, and further captures what is perceived as meaningful and important for illuminating research question. Therefore, the two orientations constituted what the current study aimed to achieve through the rigorous analysis.

Qualitative data analysis is quite a complex process. The analysis process in qualitative research is iterative, it is an on-going process where the researcher/s immerse themselves and engage from the initial encounter with the dataset up to the final stages of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In managing high volumes of data, thematic analysis organises and describes emergent data into meaningful themes. It has also become a widely used method to analyse qualitative data due to its flexibility in terms of research questions, sample size, data collection method and approaches to meaning generation (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015). The flexible approach is effective because it can be modified in terms of the needs of the study, while still providing a rich, detailed and yet multi-layered account of data (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

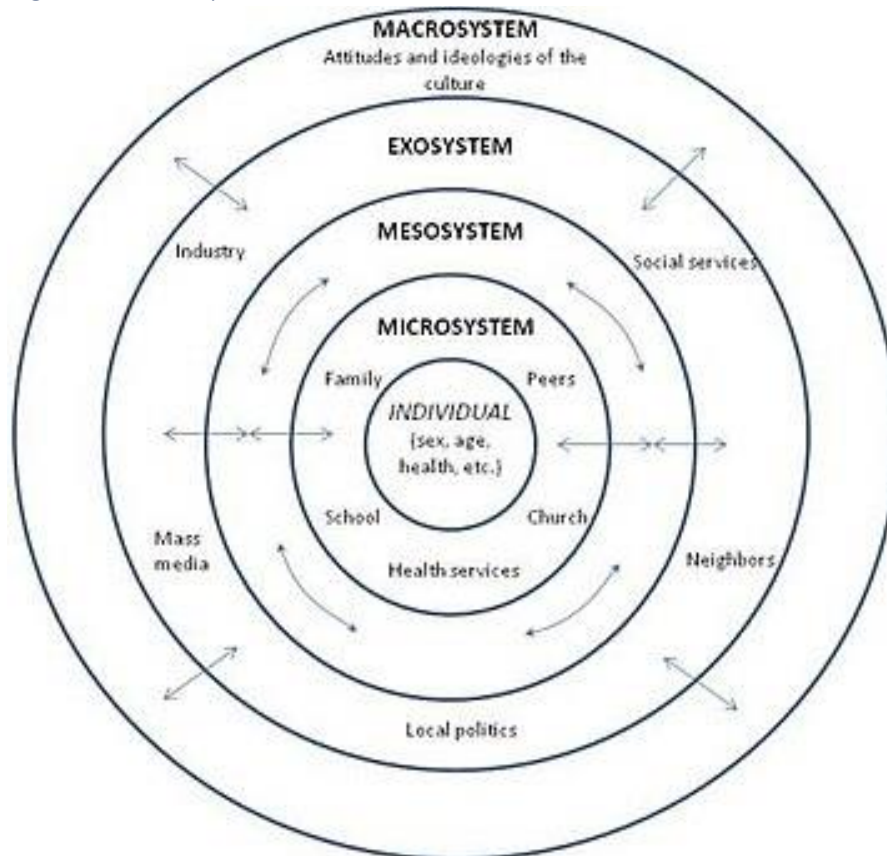
### 3.11 Theoretical framework informing the study: Ecological systems theory

The ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1989) was adopted as an adjunct theoretical framework. The intent of using the ecological systems model was to appropriately frame and guide the emergent data set concurrently from an individualised as well as systemic perspective (Rothery, 2001). The ecological systems theory as delineated by Bronfenbrenner (1989) is a theoretical framework that seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how contextual factors exert influence on ones' experiences of life by alluding to the different systems at play that contribute to one's self-improvement or the lack thereof. The ecological systems framework encapsulates numerous attributes that stem from the different theoretical perspectives in addition to the general systems theory (Rothery, 2001). Moreover, the framework provides a more holistic perspective that accounts for the contextual factors found within the framework (Rothery, 2001). The ecological theory, forming part of the holistic perspective, draws from social support, stress, and coping perspectives (Rothery, 2001).

Using a theoretical model such as the ecological systems theory methodologically is important when analysing rich descriptive data as it guides the placement of the accumulative data. The current study used the theoretical model specifically to contextualise reported experiences and further ground the research questions and aims while vigorously engaging with the complexities that arise from the literature and the data sets. The ecological systems model

draws primarily on a holistic approach which is relevant when exploring subjective experiences. In this study, the model guides the exploration of interactions between trainees and their social environments as well as the impact of contextual factors on their personal and professional development. The ecological systems theory was thus, integrated into the study as an enabling framework for obtaining in-depth understanding of the different contexts. Further, it enhanced data analysis (Puroila&Karila, 2001; Harkonen, 2009; Ngubane, 2019).

Figure 3.1: Ecosystemic Model



The ecosystemic model by Buehler (2000)

The ecosystemic model, commonly referred to as the ecological systems model is organised into in four layers, which are arranged from the layer that is most inner to the individual to the furthest as postulated by Skinner (2010). The different layers of the ecological system framework are as follows: microsystem refers to where an individual directly engages with the immediate environment and is physically present (i.e., community, home, peer group). Mesosystem refers to the connections and interactions between structures found within the microsystem, which forms a small social circle. The third layer is the exosystem, which consists of the wider social system where an individual does not directly engage with, however, it impacts on their development in the microsystem structures. The fourth layer is the

macrosystem. It has a flowing influence throughout all the other layers, and the structural component includes the values, laws and norms held at the community and national level, which are reportedly meant to provide resources to assist individuals (Williams, 2011).

The flexible approach of qualitative research was considered as an appropriate approach for analysis, particularly because of its usefulness when exploring participants' different perspectives, as it seeks to highlight similarities and differences while generating both anticipated and unanticipated insights into the study's areas of interest (Nowell et al., 2017). Clarke et al. (2015) also postulated that thematic analysis can be used to identify themes within, and across data that relates to the study participants' subjective experiences, views, perceptions and behaviour. In this regard, the analysis helped to summarise the key features of high volumes of data as it propels the researcher to take well-structured steps in handling data.

Braun and Clarke (2006) gave reference to Patton's (1999) guide to the six phases for conducting interpretive thematic analysis and were adapted in this study. The authors (2006) highlighted that thematic analysis is not fashioned in a linear process and does not move from one phase to the next. Rather, it follows a recursive process, moving back and forth as required throughout the phases, which are extensively delineated below:

#### *Phase 1: Getting familiar with the data*

The study comprised two sets of data, the first being initial individual interviews conducted with UKZN trained intern psychologists with a minimum of six-months experience in their respective internship sites in 2019. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into text. The researcher later conducted follow-up individual interviews. However, the researcher did not transcribe the interviews in a verbatim manner because they followed, after the information obtained from first interviews, hence, the significance of the individual interviews in this instance was to clarify, follow-up and probe further on aspects that the participants had previously presented on their interview responses. By so doing, the researcher reduced cases of redundancy.

The researcher first familiarised herself with the data whilst organising, analysing, and generating plausible themes emerging from the first set of interviews, which further informed the development of follow-up interview questions. The process of engaging with the data set was of great importance, and particularly an excellent start point for the researcher to be acquainted with their data (Riessman, 1993). The researcher noted down initial thoughts and ideas that she later brought forward into secondary interviews, and when she was transcribing

the interview. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that although the researcher might be familiar with the data if they had collected themselves, it is crucial that they immerse themselves in the data and acquaint themselves with the depth and breadth of the content.

In keeping with the interpretive research paradigm, the initial phase of the analysis offered the researcher an opportunity to make sense of the data. Thus, transcripts were interpreted from the different levels of the ecological framework in order to build a biopsychosocial (physical activity, working and/or living environment, family and social connections, spirituality) understanding of each participant. As highlighted earlier, interpretivism as an approach is advantageous as it constructs shared meanings that emanate from similar background experiences participants share (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interpretative act expands towards creating meaning rather than simply a systematic act of translating experience to written narrative as illustrated in this study (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999).

#### *Phase 2: Generating initial codes*

The analysis proceeded to the researcher generating initial ideas of what she found within the data, which then progressed to producing initial codes from the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes seek to identify features from the data set that are of interest to the researcher. The ecological systems theoretical framework guided the coding process. Boyatzis (1998) posits that raw data has capability to be assessed in a meaningful manner regarding the phenomenon the study is exploring. This process was conducted manually as the researcher organised the data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005).

#### *Phase 3: Searching for themes*

Potential themes were generated once all the data were initially coded and collated. The researcher created a list of different codes that she was able to identify throughout the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, this phase provided the researcher with an opportunity to re-focus the analysis on a much broader scale of themes, which was different from the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were later sorted into potential themes. From this step, the researcher was able to analyse the codes in detail and differentiate one from the other to combine and create overall themes found in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, the researcher also assessed the relationship between the codes and between themes. This analysis extended to looking at the overarching themes and their relationship with the sub-themes, an essential step that the researcher had to consider was ensuring that the all emergent themes were of relevance to the research aims and objectives.

#### *Phase 4: Reviewing themes*

The reviewing and refinement of themes helped the researcher to filter candidate themes that were insufficiently supported by the data or the content being too diverse. The phase consists of two levels of reviewing and refinement of themes. The first level was conducted on the coded data extracts where the researcher read and reviewed the collated extracts to assess whether these formed a coherent pattern. The second level was to consider the validity of individual themes and their linkage to the data set, to ascertain whether the themes were a true reflection of it. Any new themes that were possibly missed during the initial coding stages were assimilated in this phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of reviewing themes was informed by the ecological framework, as translated from interviews.

#### *Phase 5: Defining and naming themes*

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this phase is a continuation of the analysis that refines the particulars of each theme. Through the defining and refining process, the researcher was able to identify the essence of each theme and determine certain aspects of each theme captured in line with the ecological systems framework.

#### *Phase 6: Producing the report*

Once all the themes and sub-themes were fully established, the final step was for the researcher to compile the research report. It is of great importance that the analysis report presents data extracts found in the final write up. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 93), it “provides a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell”. By providing enough data extracts, they serve as evidence of themes the data set encompasses and they are a demonstration of the prevalence and authenticity of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **3.12 Trustworthiness of the study**

In addressing issues of data validity and reliability, qualitative researchers have over the years coined their own terminologies and criteria for assessing rigour. Lincoln and Guba (1985) pioneered the term trustworthiness, which is to determine the quality of qualitative research. It consists of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The study explored the role of master's training and how novice psychologists perceive their own competencies and preparedness for professional roles. The research study used Guba's model of trustworthiness to illustrate how the accuracy of the study findings was ensured and to create

transparency in how raw data was handled throughout the study (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, the model relates to the above-mentioned criteria for achieving trustworthiness of one's conclusions (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, in ensuring trustworthiness, credible methods, and sources of information, which resulted in the dependability, confirmability, and transferability were adopted.

### *Credibility*

Shenton (2004) defined credibility as methods used in qualitative research to promote confidence that the researcher has accurately presented the phenomenon under exploration. Numerous research strategies were found to be applicable to enhance credibility such as pilot testing, follow-up interviews and triangulation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have argued that the most important approach to establish trustworthiness in a research study is to ensure that it is credible. Therefore, the researcher adopted more than one qualitative methods to promote confidence in the findings.

The study ensured credibility through adopting well established research methods accepted in qualitative research. Research methods for data collection and data analysis derived from previous comparable projects that have been successful in exploring lived experiences (Shenton, 2004). In the current study, credibility was ensured through piloting the study and reviewing the interview schedule. The pilot study was conducted with smaller sample group with characteristics similar to the prospective participants for the actual study. The pilot study was a process of assessing the efficacy of the instruments developed and obtaining feedback from the pilot study. The feedback was used to ascertain whether the interview questions contributed significantly to the research questions. As stipulated by Shenton (2004), credibility can also be ensured through continuous questioning and probing so that the researcher returns to matters previously raised by the participant.

The process of clarifying, probing, and summarising took place during the individual interviewing processes through iterative questioning (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation also formed part of strengthening the study's credibility. The research used a two-phased data collection approach comprising uniform semi-structured initial individual interviews and follow-up individualised interviews. In addition, participants were assured that confidentiality was guaranteed. Anonymity was also ensured by not using any names or any form of identification. The researcher used pseudonyms in the research write up (Shenton, 2004).

### *Dependability*

The dependability of a study addresses the issue of reliability. Dependability involves the researcher guaranteeing consistency in their findings. The researcher ensured dependability by providing a detailed report of the research process to allow other future researchers to gain the same results and provided justification for the decisions taken in the execution of the study. The methodological aspects of the study such as the research design, and implementation, as well as the operational aspects of data collection have been outlined in detail to enable a future researcher to carry out a similar study to ensure dependability as suggested by Shenton (2004).

### *Transferability*

External validity is often concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Shenton, 2004). Transferability in qualitative approaches is often influenced by the degree to which contextual information regarding the fieldwork is sufficiently provided by the researcher Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Shenton, 2004). To strengthen transferability, the researcher gathered sufficiently detailed data, which was reported in an articulate manner. This process was undertaken to give the reader an opportunity to make conceptualise their own judgements and enable them to apply the findings in similar contexts (Shenton, 2004). Transferability may be difficult in a qualitative study as these studies often work with a small sample, which can pose as a challenge in generalising the findings in a larger and broader context (Shenton, 2004; Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams & Blackman, 2016).

### *Confirmability*

The concept of confirmability refers to the qualitative researcher's concern with impartiality or objectivity (Seale, 1999). The researcher ought to ensure that the findings reflect the ideas and views of the participants as opposed to the researcher's own preferences (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, the use of a two-phased data-collection was to provide depth and to reduce investigator bias. According to Shenton (2004), the researcher should be mindful of his or her own predetermined notions and should provide a rationale for the kind of method adopted as well as data-collection techniques. Moreover, a very pivotal part of confirmability is that limitations of the chosen techniques are to be acknowledged as well as why one technique took premise over others. In the methodology section of this study, the researcher has provided comprehensive reasoning as to why they chose semi-structured individual interviews as data-



collection method. A description of how the research instrument was drafted in relation to gaps identified in the literature concerning the trainee psychologist's perception of the master's training and its impact on becoming psychologists was provided. Participants' quotes were included in the findings to demonstrate that the researcher is, indeed, reflecting and interpreting the participants' own ideas.

### 3.13 Ethical consideration

Ethical concerns are a very important component of qualitative research. For that matter, ethical issues are included from the development of the research proposal to dissemination of findings (Willing, 2008). A contemporary approach to ethics ought to be flexible and integrate the context of each study to protect both the participants and the researcher. Davies and Dodd (2002) highlighted the importance of demonstrating respect for ethics in practice, that is ethical issues encountered every day during data collection e.g., voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, justice, beneficence, non-maleficence, and the right to withdraw from the study without facing any negative consequences. Ethical clearance for the study was sought and obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (protocol reference number HSS/0429/019M) (Appendix A). To ensure that ethical considerations were upheld, participants were required to give informed consent to participating in the study (Appendix B) (Davies & Dodd, 2002). In terms of protecting participants from harm, anonymity and confidentiality were assured (Neuman, 2014). Interview transcripts and raw data obtained from participants was stored electronically on a cloud account and were password protected.

### 3.14 Chapter summary

The aim of this chapter was to address various aspects pertaining to research design, research paradigm. The chapter provided a comprehensive description of the methods used to collecting this study. The process of research preparation, sampling strategies and participant selection was elaborated, to provide the reader with an understanding of how the research process was executed. Furthermore, the research instruments, data-collection procedures, data analysis, and data verification processes, were outlined in detail to ensure trustworthiness.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS OF MICROSYSTEM LEVEL

### 4.1 Chapter introduction

The current chapter presents the study's main findings and formulates a discussion from the emergent data obtained. It further illustrates the way these findings were assimilated into the ecological systems framework. The chapter is also reflective of participants' socio-demographic information relevant to the phenomena explored and includes qualitative findings identified as overall thematic representation of the emergent data. The chapter consists of excerpts that were drawn directly from the interview transcripts which are utilised to illustrate the study's main themes and sub-themes relevant to the emergent findings as presented by the participants. Moreover, the inclusion of the individual interview excerpts seeks to provide evidence found within the data set and most importantly help guide the reader to understand how the themes and sub-themes were conceptualised from the experiences and realities of participants in their respective contexts.

In addition, the chapter refers to existing literature on similar studies done and is further integrated into the study findings to strengthen the study's argument and interpretations formulated thereafter. The discussion presented in the current chapter seeks to highlight the findings identified by the researcher as meaningful within the research data set. The chapter reflects on the experiences of trainee psychologists who completed their first year of the master's training programme offered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), as well as of their experiences of subsequent 12 months practicum (internship). The analysis process leading up to the emergent findings was informed by two theoretical models.

The transactional theory of stress and coping was used to illustrate the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics that impact on the individual within an environment. The transactional theory of stress and coping, observed to have been substantially instrumental in stress literature has provided insightful concepts to be applied in the interpretation of findings. Stress literature has generally argued that the presence of stress for an individual is of less significance than how the individual appraises and responds or rather copes with the stress (Lazarus, 1984; Perrewe & Zellars, 1999). Therefore, the transactional theory lends a framework that seeks to elaborate, conceptually, how behavioural responses and individuals' characteristics are a result of a complex and dynamic relationship between environmental demands and the individual's psychological capacity to effectively respond to those demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

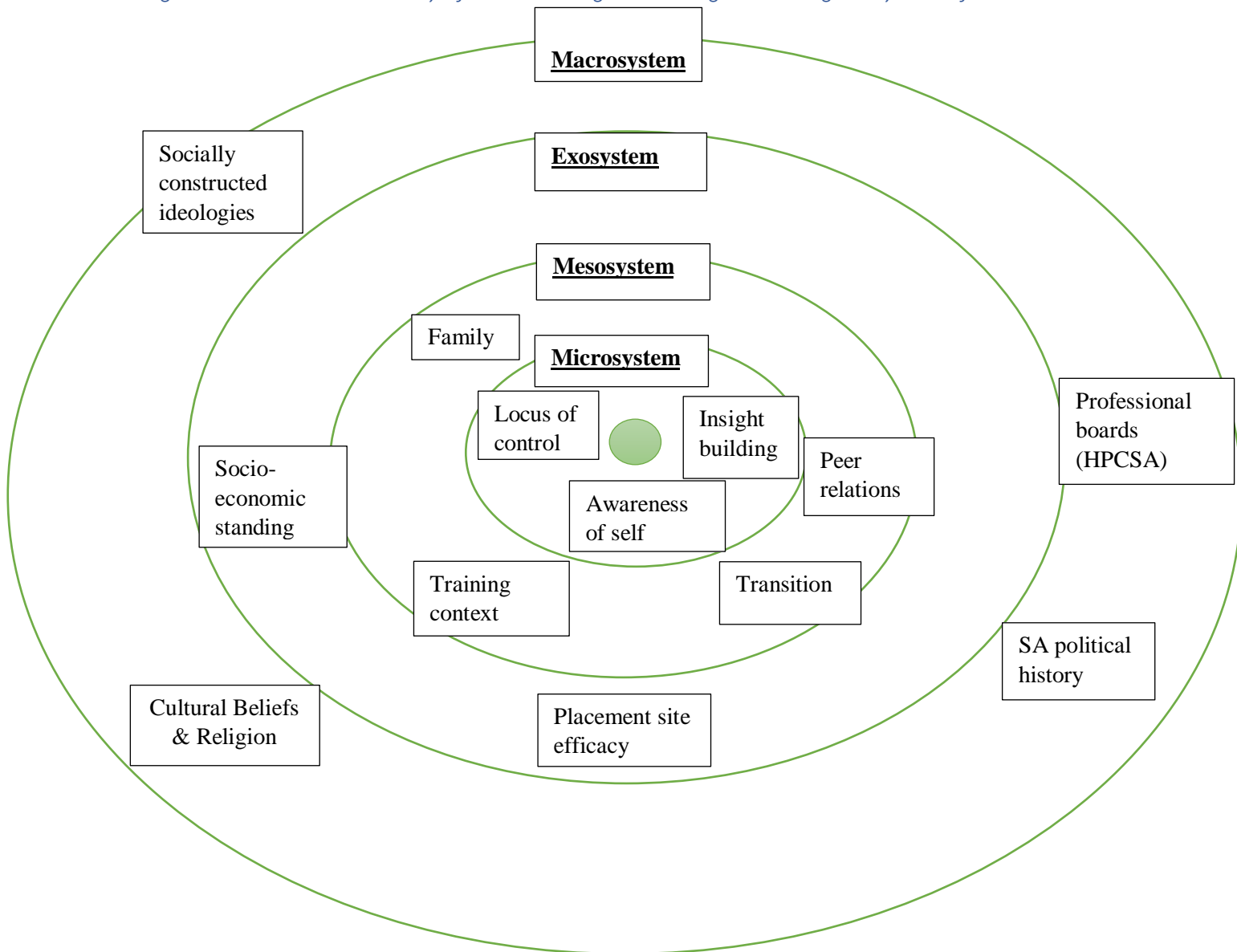
The ecological systems framework that was used to further explore and unravel the impact of the interactions that exist between the individual, environmental and systemic factors to account for the intricacies involved. According to Williams and Bryan (2013), an analysis informed by the ecological framework is systematically delineated according to the individual, environment, societal and global factors that influence trainees' stress responses and the prompted coping strategies that mitigate the impact of stress. The extensive use of the ecological systems framework served to conceptualise emergent findings intended for a consolidated understanding of the different factors that has moulded trainee psychologists' personal experiences leading to, and during the professional training and subsequently practicing within the South African context in their second year of training.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that the process of thematic analysis does not simply translate into giving an account of themes constructed from the data set but mostly involves an important role that the researcher plays in identifying patterns and the ability to carefully reconstruct the presented themes and sub-themes of research interests. In this regard, the current chapter consists of both coinciding and contrasting themes and seeks to present a representation of the various experiences relating to the psychology master's training programme. Further, it demonstrates the captured multifaceted meanings relevant to participants' perceptions of professional readiness for professional roles. It is important to highlight how the researcher was constantly aware of her own influence on the interpretation of the data, hence the utility of the ecological systems framework to eliminate potential external influences.

#### 4.2 Description of participants

The study sample consisted of five UKZN enrolled master's students ( $n=5$ ), who were, at the time, completing their second year of the master's professional training programme, which entails a 12-months internship. Of the five participants, two participants were reported to have completed their first-year master's professional training at site 1, while the other three completed their training at site 2. Of the five participants, three were training towards clinical psychology and two towards counselling psychology with four ( $n=4$ ) females and one ( $n=1$ ) male. The study further reflects on participants' ethnic backgrounds, indicating that four trainees were African and the other one was White. As indicated in the methodology chapter, all participants were assigned pseudonyms to promote anonymity and ensure that best practice in ethical standards for conducting social research were upheld.

Figure 4.2.1: Visual summary of themes integrated using the ecological systems framework



Source: developed from emergent findings of the study, (2021).

As previously stated, the research study explored the perceived preparedness of trainee psychologists on their newly acquired professional roles. The exploration of and subsequent reporting of findings was done using an ecological systems framework with the transactional theory tracing the interactive patterns between environmental demands and the individual's capacity to respond effectively. Rich descriptive data were elicited from the participants, to elaborate on the emergent findings. The findings were logically organised according to the ecological systems framework which span across three chapters. The current chapter discusses

research findings relevant to the microsystem level, while the next two are based on respectively.

#### 4.3 Microsystem level: Person/self

Delving into trainees' general perceptions and understanding of stress and coping concepts was the most appropriate start point in presenting the research findings and further discussion. This would ideally set precedence for the emergent perceptions and experiences of the professional psychology training as they arose. The brief theme titled Person/self reflects the intricate exploration of attributes that an individual (Person/Self) resonates with within themselves. The microsystem level, often described as the internal individual characteristics consists of four dominant sub-themes identified with the intent of providing an in-depth understanding of how the individual's characteristics can be attributed to the manner in which an individual interacts with their immediate environment.

The microsystem level was reflective of the many variables found within an individuals' immediate environment found to have a significant impact on the self. Transactional theory thus helped unpack the multifaceted layers that influence on cognitive processes, behaviour and coping as the theme discusses the dynamics of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors affecting individuals. Emergent themes and subsequent sub-themes unravel the multi-layered elements of characteristics believed to influence how the participant experienced the training programme. The current trainees have alluded to the first aspect being awareness of one's needs and have reflected the following:

##### 4.3.1 Awareness of self

*"I think we sometimes tend to overlook our profession, particularly that it can be emotionally toxic ...so, it's not just a 9 to 5 or an 8 to 4 job, but it's a 24 - 7 that requires so much of emotional intelligence and emotion intention from a person as well". "With M1, you don't feel it that much but with M2 that's where you start to realize that it's not just about knowing your assessments and knowing your theory but it's about being able to separate your personal and professional self from 8 to 4" (Topaz, interview 1).*

*"It is like saying, 'I am totally a useless therapist' ...now here is the reality...you have seen that patient and they are saying they are making good progress and they are better than they were before. So, there may be several factors that have contributed to that but are you such a bad therapist? For me, it was being able to distinguish between my*

*feelings, my emotions and the reality of the situations and constantly working through that” (Olivine, 1).*

Topaz and Olivine described how they continuously grappled with the intrapersonal (*Person/self*) dynamics and hoping to establish a clear sense of self, which they could attribute to self and not the professional. As postulated by Zahniser et al. (2017), trainees vigorously explored these dynamics through not only having an established sense of self, but conscientiously being aware of their individual needs. Literature across professional psychology has been shows that self-care is vastly associated with a greater sense of personal well-being and has been considered an essential component of psychology training for professional functioning (Zahniser et al., 2017).

Some participants reflected on the concept of self-care in relation to their sense of self-awareness and greater personal well-being, illustrate through the excerpts below.

*“I have learnt to be OK with myself as a psychologist... to be more reflective and more self-accepting. I think if you are a psychologist and you don’t accept yourself, it’s going to translate to your clients or your patients, and they are not going to be able to move to that self-actualisation you were talking about before because you merge to what they are supposed to be doing as well” (Beryl, 1).*

*“Personally, like I said it was becoming self-aware, I think for me that was one of the important things and I keep going back to it. So, for me personal growth in that sense that I became aware of myself and some things about myself, attending therapy as well” (Olivine, 1).*

*“ I don’t know, I’m probably a bit off topic from your research but it’s a dangerous space to be in because you are in a profession that teaches people to merge their emotional ...their logical... their intellectual... their psychological ... you know to merge all these on instances so, that they can be better people but you are not aware that you are also, in need of the same thing” (Topaz, 1).*

Participants shared their reflection on the importance of being self-aware, which very often demanded trainees of be mindful of their “quest” of becoming psychologists and how the profession and the person were intertwined. Still grappling with this, another participant further stated the below:

*“As you get to learn about yourself, some things are uncomfortable, I remember early in the year in class...I can’t remember what we were talking about exactly, but I remember that at first when it started, it was difficult to realize that those were lecturers, and they were giving us exercises and at the time one would realize that we were actually talking about ourselves” (Jade, 1).*

The progressive growth of positive psychology and prevention medicine has seen self-care as an emergent concept, endorsed as means to eradicate the adverse effects of stress and promote professional functioning and well-being (Dorociak, Rupert, Bryant & Zahniser, 2017). A research study conducted by Dorociak et al (2017) highlighted the increased attention placed on self-care amongst trainee psychologists at post-graduate level. The study reported that there has been significant support towards the focus on the value of self-care, particularly within the discipline of psychology as a meaningful part of trainees and psychologists’ well-being. The study has found that mental health professionals including trainees have, through their interaction with clients, become increasingly vulnerable to vicarious trauma, substance abuse, relational difficulties, and depression (Richards et al., 2017).

Richards, Compenni and Muse-Burke (2017) have made a compelling argument in relation to mental health professionals being at a greater risk of impairment and burnout during their professional lives, which consequently deters their therapeutic efficacy. Jade and Olivine, have alluded to the abovementioned, particularly relating to how individuals being are vulnerable to impairment.

*“That sleep wasn’t just sleep, it was mixed with passing out, like I was on the verge of passing out and I think I was depressed, and it got to a point where I was less motivated, and I started sleeping a lot. Like you know, you have work to do but you are just not motivated, and it wasn’t an entire routine, but it got to a point where I was like ‘I can’t do it’” (Jade, 1).*

*“Whether we like it, our personalities play a role in the kind of therapist we ought to be ...so working through my own stuff” (Olivine, 1).*

The experiences shared by trainees have prompted the current study to further reflect on fundamental principles of the psychology discipline both in research and in practice as enshrined in the American Psychology Association (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2002). The current study echoed the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence. APA (2002) has emphasised that the principle is not necessarily a rule. Stipulating

that it is then the counsellors' or psychologists' responsibility to *do no harm, benefit others* and *pursue excellence* in the practice of psychology (APA, 2002).

Concurring with the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2002), Richard et al. (2017) have stressed the ethical duty of all mental health professionals to constantly explore their involvement in, and beliefs related to self-care practices with the aim of mitigating the adverse effects of stress and promote coping. The experiences shared have highlighted the resonance of transactional theory within the nexus of intrapersonal factors, involving trainees' cognitive processes and internal characteristics responsible for the influences of stress responses.

#### 4.3.2 The influence of internal resources on stress responses

The manner in which one responds to stressful events is often observed by how they perceive the sense of control in altering the outcomes of those events. Psychology literature describes individuals who believe that they have control over what happen and being motivated to take action as having an internal locus of control. Individuals who believe that they have no control over what happens, and external variables are to blame are regarded as having an external locus of control. In the current study, excerpts below demonstrate how different trainees responded to stressful events during the course of the training period:

##### 4.3.2.1 Internal locus of control

*"If there's a part that I haven't been adequately prepared for, then it's up to the individual to now realize that ok these are some of the things that are coming up and I am overwhelmed... I am not coping ... so, I need to get up and do something about it and seek help because there's nothing wrong with seeking help"* (Topaz, 1).

*"For me, it was being able to distinguish between my feelings, my emotions and the reality of the situations"* (Olivine, 1).

While some trainees demonstrated having internal locus of control, a few other trainees were found to have demonstrated external locus of control which has shown to impose an even greater challenge when required to respond effectively to stressful events. The excerpts below indicate,

##### 4.3.2.2 External locus of control

*"It felt more like I was reacting to situations more than being proactive throughout the year. It's different because I find that I now spend more time taking care of myself... doing things I enjoy...and you know what, I try not to stress as much...."* (Olivine, 1).



*“To be honest with you, at the beginning of the year you get really anxious and stuff, especially when the workload was starting to pile up...so what I would do is that I would come home and sleep just to get rid of the anxiety. So, what would happen is that because I avoided it and slept, it would pile up and I would get anxious ...so it was a cycle that went on and on” (Jade,1).*

Internal characteristics attributable to protective internal resources are perceived to have been largely influenced by individuals’ personality traits as suggested in resilience studies (Theron & Theron, 2010). In addition to the level of personality functioning, internal resources include life skills such as problem solving, positive cognitive appraisals and having an internal locus of control.

#### 4.3.3 Overly high standards- (Trainees’ perceptions of expectations and how it informs professional development).

The current theme was constructed from the statements made by participants. Supporting literature meaningfully inspired the topic of this research study with the phrase “*obsessive overachievers*” referenced by Richardson et al. (2020). It is suggested to further impacts one’s desire to thrive in their overall academic journey. The excerpts below serve to illustrate the different responses presented by trainees when dealing with various forms of pressure.

##### 4.3.3.1 High standards of self- (High expectations individuals hold for themselves)

*“During my first few weeks here, I had anxiety from M1 still, feeling like you are not good enough ... you are not enough... your client won’t come back. The more I spoke to the supervisor here it’s when they realized that ‘no Beryl you need to calm down its ok not to be perfect’. There were very high expectations and you felt you never measured up to those expectations, even when you did well you just felt like ‘no but what’s wrong with me” (Beryl, 1).*

*“We had just started working so there was still that anxiety that I am from M1 and now I am in my internship, and I really had to show that there’s more that I had learnt in M1. When you are sitting there with the client, it’s totally different from what you would read from books in class” (Jade, 1).*

*“If you were getting readings here you always thought you were being evaluated, especially for me. I am a person who always wants to achieve more and work hard, so I sacrificed a lot and I put pressure on myself to make sure that I was the best that I could be. Then it was also dependent on how well I wanted to do my master’s; I know*

*myself. I couldn't internalize it so well because there was so much work that needed to be done"* (Emerald, 1).

*"I will speak about myself, in a sense that if you as a person that easily gets overwhelmed and is easily intimidated ... yes it gets to you. In terms of group dynamics as probably the M1 class, I would say it teaches you a lot, because you are entering a space where you come from honours and undergrad ... and most of us were high achievers"* (Topaz, 1).

The sub-theme above illustrated the significant effects high self-esteem may impose on ones' perception of their academic excellence and professional competency, which was characterised by generally high standards and feelings of self-worth being dependent on an individuals' performance (Clara, Cox & Enns, 2007). Contrary to the other trainees, Beryl indicated that she mostly felt pressured by external factors and reports.

#### *4.3.3.2 High standards of others- (High expectations anticipated from other people)*

*"I think Sapphire was very good at explaining what he expects from us like if we have any questions we should come to his office and talk to him so that he can understand"* (Beryl, 1).

*"Then again, I feel like there wasn't much support, people expected you to be already professional and for me it was my whole first time coming into the world of work, so I made a lot of mistakes. I think even though they weren't really said out loud I think there were kind of unwritten rules where you felt like if you didn't do by them, you were not good enough"* (Beryl, 1).

*"People like Pearl and some clients expect you to be there already and you just like 'this is my first year'. I'm not prepared for this, and other people's anxiety would feed into that anxiety as well."* *"People like Sapphire who would come to you and say, "I expect you to do the work and I expect you to be this good and professional and if you are not, I will call you out'. The accountability made me realize that you have to be good enough and work hard enough"* (Beryl, 1).

As Beryl as seen above, reflected deeper into their experiences of navigating the pressures of the training programme, it became apparent that most of the difficulties trainees often will refer to their own high expectations of themselves as that of the professional training. Consequently, trainees put more strain on themselves prematurely in the training. Clara et al. (2007) observed influences perception of high self-worth, which as a result, exacerbate anxiety among trainees.

From the rigorous engagement with professional psychology literature, and the data collection process, a common trend observed was that of participants demonstrating prominent history of having high self-esteem and striving for academic excellence.

These findings were supported by Ngubane's (2019) study, which explored resilience amongst South African female master's students. The current study coincides with the argument made by Ngubane (2019) who ascertains that having high academic aspirations can positively influence numerous life domains, including that of high educational achievement. The interview process afforded trainees an opportunity to reflect on the training and in turn, the insight building theme emerged. Below are examples of what the trainees said.

#### 4.3.4 Reflective insight building- (Insight gained through reflecting back on the experiences)

*"The internship year is for me, the year where you truly find your feet and understand who you want to be. I mean you learn all the theoretical framework in your master's and then in your internship you are kind of allowed to practice and you are exposed to clients where else in M1 you are not adequately exposed to clients"* (Emerald, 1).

*"I think it has taught me a lot in terms of knowing what I know should have been in place, and what I would want or the advice I can give to other people going into masters"* (Emerald, 2).

*"Coming to the awareness of it that there is stuff that we go through in our lives...not being aware of the extent to which it has affected you. When you are in class, and you are around people ...you then just think about it, and you become aware of it. I just got emotional"* (Jade, 2).

Emerald and Jade highlighted the in-depth exploration that led to some insightful epiphanies of the self. The research interviews were an exercise that allowed constant reflection on the nuances of the training and its multifaceted factors that gave trainees perspective especially in response to how they innately engaged with the training programme. As Jade's excerpts above illustrate, in the training itself, she was afforded an opportunity to unpack some of her own experiences, with other trainees describing their experiences of becoming self-aware. Below are examples of what participants shared.

*"Like I said, it was about self-discovery and that you are learning a lot about yourself ...for me I would say it gave me the confidence to be who I am now and to be what I am now, the transition from M1 and my internship"* (Jade, 2).

*“Personal therapy helped a lot ...but then the decision is yours whether you want to have therapy. For me, therapy helped a lot especially in terms of the continuous integration of professional life and personal life”, (Olivine, 1).*

*“You learn... you have no other option but to learn. I think what’s more important is to use the profession in a sense that seek mentorship... go for therapy go for counselling because like I said your supervisor or lecturers can only do their part and when you transition, and you realize that there is a part where I haven’t been adequately trained in” (Topaz, 1).*

Topaz added:

*“I think that lecturers can go as far as they can to train us professionally but there is growth that you need to undergo as an individual that nobody can take you through and it’s only then where you see how toxic it is; with M1 you don’t feel it that much but with M2 that’s where you start to realize that it’s not just about knowing your assessments and knowing your theory but it’s about being able to separate your personal and professional self from 8 to 4” (Topaz, 1).*

At the micro level, the themes above have illustrated how trainees continuously appraised the significance of external stressors on trainee psychologists’ well-being. The research study created the opportunity for participants to share their experiences of the training and transitioning from a student to an intern psychologist. The subjective experiences recalled by trainees have confirmed how the process of qualifying as a psychologist is very complex and undoubtedly a time when novice psychologists undergo tremendous personal and professional transformation.

As Skovholt (2012) postulated, trainees enter a world of uncertainty at the start of their practicing career, which can provoke feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. The research, consistent with the above claims, illustrated the emotional stresses as well as feelings of self-doubt and performance anxiety that have become central features of the development of psychologists as described in extant literature on professional psychology.

As trainees introspectively reflected on their personal development during training, most trainees found that their personal development was interwoven with professional development. There was an observable shift amongst trainees from attempting to differentiate or separate the person (themselves) from the profession to seeing the person and the profession as being

interwoven. Gaining insight on how the one feeds into the other, and that the two cannot be viewed in isolation. The increasing demands placed on the trainees, either personally or professionally, thus initiated an intervention process. This process is an individual's system of capabilities that invoke appropriate behavioural responses to the perceived stressful situations. In relation to the transactional theory, as proposed by Lazarus and colleagues (1984, 1988, 1992), stress is resultant of the dynamics that persists between intrapersonal (*internal characteristics*) and interpersonal (*situational circumstances*) factors.

A recurring theme was the level of stress experienced when trainees were confronted by perceived inability to effectively respond to the demands attributed to the frequent evaluation and constantly having to juggle the multiple roles of being a student in practice while maintaining academic repertoire. Participants helped to identify the common professional, academic, and personal sources of stress because of the training conditions. Thus, the high levels of stress that were reported related to trainees' personal self-expectations (perceptions of self-doubt and feeling of incompetence) around their professional development as developing psychotherapists. Trainees, as the research revealed tended to perceive themselves as not having adequately developed a cohesive sense of professional competence, felt uncertain about their own professional abilities and functioning and felt inadequately prepared (in terms of technical skills and clinical knowledge) to provide psychotherapy that would be beneficial to the client.

The presented themes and sub-themes on the micro level illuminated how trainees tapped into their internal (cognitive) processes as they recollected their experiences. It became evident that being able to cope in event of a stressful encounter invoked specific cognitive and behavioural efforts that afforded an individual the capacity to manage the increasing demands. In efforts to build knowledge and insight on how one responds to stressors, trainees reflected on their own coping strategies. The research findings can thus conclude that trainees develop and devise better coping strategies from their lived experiences.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS OF MESOSYSTEM LEVEL

### 5.1 Chapter introduction

The ecological systems framework was adopted to play a pivotal role in the data analysis process. The current chapter, chapter five, presents influential factors that emerged from the mesosystem level. The chapter focuses on emergent findings aligned with influential factors associated with the social environment. The study has reported on findings exploring the interactional relationships that individuals have with their external environment. Themes and sub-themes discussed below serve as a window to the meaningful contribution that were evoked by the interrelated systems of the ecological model.

### 5.2 Person-Environment relationship

The mesosystem level primarily focuses on the connections and interactions that exist between an individual and their environment on a much broader scale. This system consists of two or more microsystems, found to have either direct or indirect influence on what happens within the mesosystem. The interconnectedness of sub-systems as ascertained by Bronfenbrenner (1995) is the proximal casual effect that is created between these two systems. As trainees reflected on the master's training, they started unpacking the multi-layered subjective experiences of the programme. The researcher observed that some trainees were still hesitant to divulge details of their experiences of the training. It was after the researcher had reassured trainees that their contributions in the study would not be traced back to them and how their experiences would be used for research purposes only. The assurance evidently afforded the participants an opportunity to engage with research topic with the intent to reach greater academic platforms.

The *Person/Self* theme offered a contextually sound background for the current findings, particularly in relation to the subsequent level on the ecological systems framework, which is the mesosystem. According to the visual summary of integral themes provided (see *Fig.4.2.1*), the mesolevel was attentive to relational dynamics between the self (trainee) and their environment, the level consists of three dominant interactional factors that trainees have identified in the system, which are *familial dynamics*, *peer bonding*, and the *training context*.

#### 5.2.2 Familial dynamics

The theme takes the reader through how the influences of the direct environment (microsystem) contributes to the way one relates with the world (mesosystem) (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 2004).

Familial dynamics are characterised by the interrelationships within the family system, which helps to contextually understand the manner in which an individual's family background contributes to his or her responsiveness to stressors in the training programme. As Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) stipulated, the family environment intricately mediates the effect of external factors and how family relations developed and are maintained which later inform interpersonal relationships. The excerpts below have elaboratively shown how the involvement of family has positive effects on trainees as they have confidently attributed most of their coping to have stemmed from supportive relationships and dynamics within their families.

*“My husband was supportive enough. It was a very difficult journey and not being paid and I had to financially be supported by him, so he was very supportive and understanding, which to me was a coping mechanism just having him there. Family was supportive”* (Emerald, 1).

*“The support that I had was from my family. Further, I was close to two students in class... now those were the people I would talk to, and they played that supportive role”* (Jade, 1).

Moreover, the comment below by Beryl indicated that having a deep relationship with someone helped with coping with the stressful demands as they would speak with their spouse as they would in a counselling session. Having someone you feel you can come to with anything, especially stressors aided to their supportive system, see excerpts below:

*“I am dating someone that I am going to marry soon, and I think now I suppose I need it but then my internship has become like my counselling session and what not”* (Beryl, 1).

Lee and Lok (2004) have ascertained that emotional and social support received from family, peers, school, and the community play a pivotal role in determining the interrelationships formed within the environment.

### 5.2.3 Peer relations

Participants in the current study shared their experiences with fellow trainees within peer relations during training. Participants further reflected on the meaningful contributions that peer relations have on their self-understanding and self-awareness which evoked a sense of collective experience that helped with their professional development competency. The study

further explored the impact of peer relations amongst trainee psychologists. Below are examples of excerpts from what participants said.

*“I think it’s important to develop strong relationships during your M1 because I have found that with the supervisors or a classmate you don’t feel as alone, and you have that support because sometimes you just get to the point where you feel like you are falling apart” (Olivine, 1).*

*“In terms of coping mechanisms or coping with the demands, we didn’t get much support here in the programme... for me it was finding friends in the class which we are good friends now. So, it’s important to make friends with people in your class or the other class so that people know what you are going through. Your family won’t know what you are going through...your parents won’t know what you are going through and it’s great to create that connection with the class to support each other, whether it’s through sending each other notes or asking for help” (Emerald, 1).*

*“Now you are entering a space with people who have strong personalities and strong dynamics as you do but it’s also a space where it doesn’t allow competition. Where you realize that I may have been a strong person in my previous years of studies but now I am with other people with just as strong personalities or just as strong characteristics, but we need each other. I think that’s one thing that rolled us close as a group, the fact that we needed each other, almost everything that we did we had to lean on each other. There was a whole lot of groupwork, we attended lectures together ... we depended on each other for stuff” (Topaz, 1).*

As with the current findings discussed above, supporting the claims and further made references to the excerpts of trainees, demonstrated the various factors indicated to have influenced the peer relationships formed in the training environment. Most trainees indicated that the training somewhat fostered a sense of collectiveness amongst themselves, which subsequently aided with reinforcing support structures during training. Peer support within academic settings has been perceived as an enabling factor as individuals interact and associate with peers who they view to have a positive outlook or are akin to themselves. These associations are believed to help individuals draw aspirations which promotes coping. Participants described how they took premise in ensuring that they build strong peer bonds that help to supplement support structures in their programme.



Participants described how relationships formed during the process of their training positively contributed to them feeling a strong sense of support. The excerpts suggest that collective experience of the trainees significantly deepened the connection of peer relationships providing a strong support system amongst themselves. Beryl indicated how she, at times found solace in knowing that everyone was going through the same emotions as she was, which meant that she was not the only one. She also mentioned how this sometimes worked out negatively for her as she would get distressed due to how her peers were seemingly anxious and may have triggered her own anxieties. Below is an example of what she said.

*“I think it was a bit of both because like when you see the more anxious ones and you just think you are not anxious enough then it’s a big deal and you get more anxious. At the same time, you would feel more comfortable that if you are anxious the other person is also anxious ...if you see a common trend, you’d feel better about it in some sense. There are other people that I could mention that whenever they were anxious about something, they searched the internet and would share information with the rest of us. It was a bit of both in the sense that it helped and then it didn’t help but mostly it helped more than it didn’t help” (Beryl, 1).*

It may also be argued that peer support within academic contexts commonly helps students not lose courage in their own educational aspirations and that positive competition between peers where trainees constantly work towards maintaining good academic standing. Jade’s contributions in this regard illustrate how competition amongst academic peers may be debilitating to one’s learning and academic growth, as competition begets unhealthy competition that infringes their personal and professional development. One participant explained:

*“They would tell us that we are anxious and all of that, another one told us that this competition stuff should end we all here to learn. You see it all got to a point where we were overly competitive and when they asked questions in class you would be scared to answer questions because you feared giving the wrong answer. This one lecturer actually called us out and told us that we should stop this nonsense, we were actually not aware at the time, and he made us aware” (Jade, 1).*

*“There was a point in time where I felt like giving up ...for some reason the sense that I got with our group last year... I don’t know if it’s a group dynamic or what but there*

*wasn't that thing of supporting each other ...it was more of competing with one another" (Jade, 1).*

Research has shown that trainee psychologists struggle with performance anxiety that is attributed to being constantly evaluated as well as the perceived or actual competition with peers (Badali & Habra, 2003; Pakenham & Stafford-Brown, 2012 as cited in Bettney, 2017). The above factors can be ascertained as realities of working in or training to work in a helping profession, blended with personal characteristics such as striving for perfectionism, which then emphasises the hypersensitivity to peer competition and consequently resulted in unhealthy competition that further alienates trainees from one another.

Although the role of peer relationships in graduate education is not widely studied, Chui, Ziemer, Palma and Hill (2014) have highlighted that maintaining open and strong peer relationships for graduate students to collectively manage demands and may help educators understand the needs of graduate students and foster more conducive learning environments (Chui et al., 2014). Further, they stressed the importance of being more cognisant of the influence of others on the self and the self on others as being an imperative part of clinical training. The abovementioned research claims were especially relevant to the emergent findings as trainees have referred to the effects of peer relationships and how the environment influenced their learning and professional development.

#### 5.2.4 Training environment

The aforesaid sub-theme on training environment and the environmental effects of numerous factors that contribute to the professional training and further explored subsequent perceptions of their professional abilities and identities. The excerpts below illustrated how most trainees expressed their challenges on matters relating to their experiences of the first year of professional training. Trainees such as Beryl, Emerald and Jade mentioned how the training setting or actual workspace induced feelings of anxiousness, high stress levels and a sense of resentment. These were reportedly occurring because of the situational context, as we observe a trend of infringements caused by the group being labelled names.

*"To be honest, I think I have a lot of negative stuff to say about our MI because of the anxiety and the working space that we were in" (Beryl, 1).*

*"I found the first training of training very stressful like anyone else. What didn't help is that we were labelled as an anxious class that we were even called ... we had a bunch*

*of names thrown at us. So, for us that wasn't helpful and for me in terms of coping, because we didn't get the support here"* (Emerald, 1).

*"I remember this one time our group... we were labelled, given all kinds of names ... so now we had that feeling that when we walk into the clinic, we had to put a smile...and I hated that place to be honest with you. You could feel the tension walking in, and you knew that you have to just suck it up and attend to clients...go to your classes and leave that place"* (Jade, 1).

Retrospectively reflecting on their two years of training, namely the master's coursework and subsequently the internship, trainee's contributions crystalized how the environment played an encompassing role in how participants, in hindsight, perceived their own preparedness. In the excerpts below, Emerald, 1 and Topaz are observed to have alluded to the contextual responses of trainees being attributed to the adaptive factors of the training environment. Both participants made compelling statements on how, what they considered as change of environment, afforded them an opportunity for personal and professional development, attributing this to less intense emphasis on academic grading and evaluation.

*"Master's was probably the hardest years I've ever done, and I extremely hated it ... it was hard you know. Like I said, not having enough support...there were a lot of factors and for me I find it very hard to compare it to this year. This year is very different, the internship I am doing this year... it's such a nice environment...so for me it was just an environment change ...it was so nice and refreshing and I guess you not being evaluated all the time ...it's not for marks"* (Emerald, 1).

*"I'd say it's a thing of an environment, the environment being actually conducive enough for me to grow and learn as opposed to your M1 where you just don't care about yourself, but you care more about your work"* (Topaz, 1).

The findings revealed that sharing experiences within a safe, trusted, and non-judgmental environment as seen under the peer relations sub-theme positively influenced trainees to explore more effective ways of responding to stress, coping, and maintaining awareness of their personal and professional needs. For instance, realising that as trainees, they were all entering uncharted waters and instead of competing with one another, the best way to cope with the demands was to build peer support systems. Although the question was not part of the predetermined semi-structured interview schedule, most of the participants referred to the

training environment, trainees gravitated their reflections on the meaningful contributions made to their development. The theme of transition emerged.

### 5.3 Transition

The findings have suggested that participants of the study have closely linked higher the stress levels or associated “stress” with the training components such as constant evaluation, excessive workload, time-pressures and therapeutic competency. Trainees evidently become vulnerable to emotional distress, as the demands increased, and overwhelming stress and anxiety started to set in. To further highlight the urgency for one to be prepared for this phase of their training, see excerpts below:

*“If you are going through a lot in your personal life, like I was going through the most in my life which in turn made the transition pretty much difficult for me. There are a lot of factors that influence that transition I suppose you seek help at the point that you require it” (Olivine, 1).*

*“ So, it was a transition, it was overwhelming in a sense that it was a lot to do at once ...but I think that our programme tried the best that it could to prepare us but they could only do so, much because again if you as an individual is going to get caught up in everything else then I guess that takes away the amount of preparation that the programme may have done” (Topaz,1).*

The trainees’ excerpts further alluded to how the training programme gradually introduced them to a shift with their training schedules as academic and work demands increased, impacting their efficacy to adapt. In seeking to understand the subjective experiences reported, the researcher probed further, and requested participants to describe the shift from being a part-time psychologist to being a full-time psychologist. Below is an example of what one participant said.

*“M2 was a lot ... it was a lot ...it was a lot... oh my God, it was a lot (laughs). It’s a lot because I think what people don’t understand about... “it was overwhelming in a sense that it was a big transition from obviously just being a student to being a student and professional being part-time because we did our placements, and we were required to be strictly professional during our placements as well” (Topaz, 2).*

Other trainees reported that:

*“Apart from my own emotional stuff ...academically as well...transitioning from Honours and coming here when you are very independent and what is expected from you, and you know that you are being constantly evaluated that was scary for me (laughs). Having to juggle all of that...you know sometimes you come back home, and you are exhausted and now you have all these readings that you have to do in preparation for your class” (Jade,1).*

*“To be honest, I feel like it was good in a sense that... well its huge jump from Honours to something completely different, so there I feel like there is a lack of preparation from Honours level. In terms of master’s, I feel like compared to other universities from what I have heard, our training is not as in-depth compared to other universities. I would say I wasn’t adequately trained, although I feel privileged for having such awesome supervisors during my internship that have helped me further develop my skills and knowledge as a counselling psychologist. I feel like the first year provide good basics to the overall training process” (Emerald, 1).*

*“It’s like I’m living in a different world honestly (laughs), some people will tell you something different but for me M1 at \_\_\_\_\_ I hated it because of the expectations. I felt like I wasn’t doing enough. Further, I was traveling a lot. Now coming to my internship site here, I feel like, first, having my own space, my own room, I have kind of made it my own space. Now when clients come, they get to see more of my personality as a person and now I am more relaxed... more comfortable as a psychologist and the more I am comfortable with my space the more my clients are comfortable with me” (Beryl, 1).*

Participants identified common academic, professional, and personal sources of distress, reported to have been a result of the training conditions and experiences. Participants who perceived themselves as not having developed an adequate cohesive sense of professional competencies felt uncertain about their own professional abilities reporting to being inadequately prepared in terms of technical skills and clinical knowledge, in the first year of their training.

The transition of trainees was identified as a prominent theme in the study. The data were meaningfully organised to illustrate the significant experiences of participants as suggested by the conceptual framework: transactional theory of stress and coping (Dewe & Cooper, 2007;

Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Trainees delineated on their person-environment dynamics, indicating that they often found themselves intertwined with the pressures of the training (external) while processing internal pressures and constantly trying to separate the one from the other. According to the transactional theory, the person-environments relationship is anchored by cognitive, appraisal, and coping.

Excerpts have served as illustration of how through the same master's training programme, trainees held different perceptions of their preparedness to the newly acquired professional roles as intern psychologists. For instance, although Topaz (pseudonym) initially described her transition as having been "a lot" and further highlighting that the common human error most people make is to think that psychology as a profession is the same as any other jobs as shown in the excerpt below.

*"So, it's hard but it's something that people need to be aware of because these dynamics always come in and the more oblivious you are to it the more you find yourself drowning in the profession. What we sometimes tend to overlook about our profession is that it can be emotionally toxic ...so, it's not just a 9 to 5 or an 8 to 4 job it's a 7 to 4 that requires so much of emotional intelligence and emotion intention from a person as well"* (Topaz, 2).

The meaningful points raised in the excerpts demonstrate how trainees have had to be fully open to the complexities of the Person-Environment relationship. Topaz, amongst other trainees highlighted how she had to develop an awareness of the self, which was separate from the environment, however the two factors remained interconnected with one entity influencing the other, as confirmed in the transactional theory of stress and coping. Lazarus (2000) argued that individuals are subjective about what they pay attention to regarding their appraisals, which were often as a result of environmental stimuli and are generally ambiguous. Therefore, what may be perceived as being threatening for the one individual may not be for another as there would have also been an amalgamation of other individual factors such as different goals and aspiration in addition to the environmental factors that interplay.

The study has carefully placed emphasis on how most trainees, as noted in the excerpts below, illustrated the significance of retrospection and its' contribution to one's life, more so in adverse events where trainees related to emotionally stressful and unpleasant experiences encountered during the training programme (Ngubane, 2019).

This was evidently clear from the attached excerpts, as trainees presented multiple perspectives on how they had experienced the transformation from students to professional psychologists. For instance, the process of transitioning into the different roles was reported to be demanding for other trainees while some reported to have responded effectively as they had mentally prepared themselves.

To further illustrate the transformative nature of the programme, the excerpts below have elaborated on trainees' reflections, focusing on how to function effectively. The phenomenon of boundaries and boundary settings was introduced by participants as they engaged the researcher in their experiences of managing the increasing demand of the training. As participants elaborate further in the excerpts below, there appears to be noteworthy efforts from the current study's participants to maintain a separate personal life to the profession or rather the professional.

#### 5.4 Navigating boundary setting as trainees

The excerpts below demonstrate that the experiences encountered by trainee psychologists, predominantly in the first year of training, significantly informed the need for boundaries to be set as they immersed themselves in the training. As discussed earlier in the findings chapter, trainees attended personal psychotherapy, identified as a supportive system, needed to cope with the stressors of the programme. Trainees, in the below excerpts indicate how efforts to uphold an awareness of their own personal needs and how those differed from their professional needs. Two of the three expressions indicated how through going to psychotherapy, the additional work they were doing in their own session guided them in identifying the need for trainees to establish healthy relationships with their working environment, including interpersonal relationships in it, as they discovered themselves in the profession, see below:

*“Going into my internship I had to put a lot of boundaries like to say, ‘this is my qualification and I have to do well at it ...this is what I can do to help you guys at home and this I am not going to be able to do’. So, setting a lot of boundaries and being more professional and a lot of mistakes made in M1 informed a lot of what to do and what not to do in my internship year” (Beryl, 1).*

*“Like saying, ‘I am totally a useless therapist’ ...now here is the reality...you have seen that patient and they are saying they are making good progress and they are better than they were before. So, they’re maybe several factors that have contributed to that but*

*are you such a bad therapist? For me, it was being able to distinguish between my feelings my emotions and the reality of the situations and constantly working through that” (Olivine, 1).*

*“I think that’s what helped in my case is that I did seek therapy during my M1, and I had someone who helped me ... groomed me and stuff so, that when I was in M2, I was already able to separate myself ... I was already able to know when to draw the line and when my personal stuff is coming into therapy and stuff like that” (Topaz, 1).*

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989, 1995), conceptualised human development as an ongoing process that spans across one’s lifetime. Through these processes, the individual adapts to their environment, coupled with progressively more successful abilities to participate in and restructure that environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). At various phases of the training programme, trainee psychologists were observed to have grappled with establishing and maintaining boundaries as development progressed. These boundaries as trainees suggested, were needed for preserving their ability to function optimally within their environment within recognised parameters they had established themselves. Trainees divulged how it became increasingly clear how they had to distinguish between the person from the profession while undergoing a process of integrating the two illustrate, it contributed meaningfully to maintaining competence and optimal functioning. Participants further reported:

*“With M1, you don’t feel it that much but with M2 that’s where you start to realize that it’s not just about knowing your assessments and knowing your theory but it’s about being able to separate your personal and professional self from 8 to 4” (Topaz, 1).*

*I never really prioritized selfcare. I was more ...it felt like more I was reacting to situations more than being proactive throughout the year. It’s different because I find that I now spend more time taking care of myself... doing things I enjoy...and you know what I try not to stress as much... I can’t be almost reacting all the time” (Olivine, 1).*

Participants often reported feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the professional training, both in the M1 and internship. In response to these challenges, professional psychology literature as reiterated by Rupert and Dorociak (2019) has singled-out self-care practices as incorporating well-functioning strategies to help ameliorate stress impact and aid in coping with demands of clinical work and sustain effective functioning. As suggested in the theory, the cognitive appraisal informed the selection of coping mechanisms that were utilised to either resolve the identified stressor or reduce the impact. As such, cognitive processes, including



the awareness of personal needs, monitoring feelings, proactively managing challenges, anticipated to contribute to one's sense of accomplishment. Coping strategies were argued to aid in maintaining positive feelings about work under high stress levels. Trainees reported adopting several well-functioning strategies as the next theme delineates further.

## 5.5 Adaptive coping mechanisms

The transactional model suggests that individuals tend to engage in a secondary appraisal process to change the conditions that are perceived as threatening. This secondary intervening process (based on an individual's evaluation of the challenges presented by the situation) and further devises appropriate coping strategies. As postulated by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), this process involves a constant reappraisal and changes of cognition and behaviour in attempts to cope or manage the stressful internal or external demands that are placed on the individual.

Psychotherapy was frequently reported by trainees as their main coping strategy. The study's findings concurred with the claims made by the transactional theory as it considers emotion-focused coping as cognitive strategies that an individual seeks to gain positive value from the perceived negative event. Moreover, this form of coping is argued to enhance the individuals' perceived control over a situation and makes way for more productive coping especially in instances where minimal change can be done (Lazarus, 1993; Ally, 2014). To further understand how participants in the current study have engaged with the emotion-focused intervention, psychotherapy as a sub-theme is elaborated below.

### 5.5.1 Personal therapy

Ivey and Waldeck (2013) have highlighted that there is an increasingly expanding body of researchers interested in exploring how personal psychotherapy impacts professional development, personal well-being, and clinical effectiveness of mental health practitioners. Personal therapy, as argued by Ivey and Waldeck (2013), is not yet a universal requirement in the professional training of psychologists despite numerous trainees reporting having undergone psychotherapy at some stage of their training. Concurring with the aforesaid, trainee psychologists in the current study have presented the different ways that personal therapy has impacted their professional development, clinical effectiveness and their overall coping. Trainee psychologist reported:

*“Personal therapy ...I never really prioritized selfcare I was more ...it felt like more I was reacting to situations more than being proactive throughout the year. It's different because I find that I now spend more time taking care of myself... doing things I*

*enjoy...and you know what, I try not to stress as much... I can't be almost reacting all the time", (Olivine).*

*"I think it was a lot of things I learnt from my therapy, and I embraced a lot of colours around my office. When I say colour, I mean ...when I am stressed, I turn to my creativity more than anything else. I tried to be more organized. Putting order and going back to the drawing board to check what I was doing wrong and how could fix it ...looking at my goals and looking at how could achieve them. I would say a lot of being organized, being social, creativity and being able to talk to someone else outside of this maybe your partner just to feel in touch with everyone else" (Beryl, 1).*

*"I went for therapy during my M1, and that helped. I think another thing that helped was my social life... I have a very active social life. Again, it's that kind of thing where you know that you are still an individual person, you can be a clinical psychologist from this time to this time but after work you are Topaz. Therapy in M1 taught me to separate and draw boundaries with myself. I think again when you seek therapy in the profession, again this is my subjective view ... the earlier you seek therapy the better it gets for you because again you are a psychologist" (Topaz, 1).*

Olivine further described how her personal therapy, helped her take practical steps towards her personal well-being particularly relating to self-care practices. She reported how prior to personal therapy, her personal well-being was significantly impacted by her stress responses, which negatively affected her clinical effectiveness. Olivine's excerpts on her experience of personal therapy touches on Rupert and Dorociak (2019) emphasis on the importance of delving on well-functioning strategies as well as career-sustaining behaviours that potentially achieve a work-life balance.

*"I am not going to lie and say I had it all together. When I started the internship, I think I was all over the place....so I would say personal therapy helped to push me enough to finish M1. Practical things like doing a case presentation and writing my notes at the bottom of the slide so that I read them through the case, so practical things like keeping notes, sticky notes, trying to do your work before its due" (Olivine).*

In the excerpt below, Beryl gave an account of how as she progressed with her psychology studies, developing as a trainee psychologist resulted in relational dynamics shifting between her therapist and herself. This could be attributed to the awareness she gained through knowledge and skills offered at master's level and how the attachment formed was influencing

the effectiveness on her personal therapy. Beryl has highlighted the limitations about the helpfulness of psychotherapy.

*“Last year, I went for counselling at the university student support thrice. The lady was very helpful in my Honours but in my master’s, she wasn’t because I felt like there was a lot of countertransference going on there somehow, I saw her as a mother as opposed to being my psychologist so I kind of wanted to protect her from giving her too much load or whatever. At the end, I will be more frustrated because I had a lot to say to her but at the same time, I had to protect her by not saying too much. Then I ended up quitting counselling” (Beryl, 1).*

Trainee psychologists have showed how personal therapy helped create a distinction between the self and the professional to identify and being mindful of strategies to employ to ensure that the two are not in conflict with one another but rather complement one another in developing holistically. The findings elaborated above support the claims of a study conducted by Ivey and Waldeck (2014) which illuminated the reciprocal effects of personal therapy. The interchangeable effects of experiencing and simultaneously learning about the process of therapy was received positively received by trainee psychologists and meaningfully influenced the multiple perspectives they held pertaining to their professional competencies. Excerpts were also suggestive of personal therapy being trainee psychologist’s cornerstone to aid with keeping abreast with the demands of the training. Jade reported how her personal therapy helped to mitigate challenges that stemmed directly from the training programme.

*“I was in therapy and that really helped, especially around that month that isn’t for me, which is May. I would say that during that time I was difficult even with the supervisor that I had at the time and the supervisor at my placement because I wasn’t getting any support from the two of them” (Jade, 1).*

Trainee psychologists have indicated how their personal therapy had contributed to their professional development and had benefitted their clinical training. Trainees’ ability to recollect their experiences enhanced their understanding of the processes and dynamics of psychotherapy, particularly experiences of transference, interpretation, termination, and therapy technique. These findings corroborate previous findings that personal therapy complements professional training by providing a vehicle for cognitive and emotional understanding of the therapeutic process and dynamics of psychotherapy (Kumari, 2011). It has however, also become evident from the excerpts that support was reportedly scarce in the

training programme itself as trainees were observed to have used psychotherapy as an adaptive coping mechanism in dealing with the pressures inflicted on them by the professional training. Other forms of coping strategies were reported by trainees:

#### 5.5.2 Lifestyle adjustments

*“Consciously taking time to spend time by myself and with the people in my circle as well... having an active lifestyle, taking care of my physical health, taking care of... I don’t know just the basic stuff like you’re eating ...you’re exercising and what not”*  
(Topaz, 1).

### 5.6 Occupational support on help seeking behaviour

The theme unpacked the influential facets of organisational or professional support on individuals’ help-seeking behaviours. The two dominant sub-themes under the current theme help capture the distinctive gap between the training sites. Trainees’ excerpts serve as indicators in illustrating the notable different impact amongst trainees whose sites prioritised support to those that felt there was no support offered to them by the training team. Most participants’ accounts reflected that the master’s professional programme was not supportive to trainees. Trainee psychologists’ responses alluded to the general perception that persists which has somewhat been desensitised, pertaining to the lack of professional support systems within training programmes. Trainees reported being confronted with challenges in instances where the environment was uncondusive to their personal or professional development hence the sub-theme

Engaging on some coping strategies trainees adopted specifically during the training, Topaz stated that for her, it was that of maintaining a personal life that was outside of psychology profession. She demonstrated a clear distinction that she made with separating her work from her personal life and emphasised how keeping the two separates helped her to constantly be mindful of work-life balance and ensured her lifestyle was not consumed by the training.

#### 5.6.1 Supervisory support

Previous findings by Kuyken, Peters, Powers and Lavender (2003) ascertained that practical and emotional support from supervisors and colleagues help modulate the stress-psychological adaption relationships. Support received from supervisors was argued to have different functional roles in buffering against stress (Kuyken et al., 2003). Moreover, empirical research studies have shown that academic settings with supportive and safe environments/spaces often safeguard the repercussions of risk by offering protective factors and promote resilience among students (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011; Ngubane, 2019). One other participant reported positive

correlations between supportive supervisory relationship as well as mentorship and moderating stress. Topaz recollected the positive influences of the support that was made available by the psychology department where she trained, the study was able to ascertain the meaningful contributions of the support on her perceived professional competency, characterised by emotional and intellectual insight. The excerpts below are reflective of this phenomenon.

*“In M1, the supervisors that were our mentors really allowed us into their space... they gave us the space that not only if you feel overwhelmed by the profession but also, if there’s some personal things that are getting the way. So, they were accessible enough to that and they made it compulsory as well, the mentorship and supervision... it really helped. So, it was formal in M1” (Topaz, 1).*

*“I’m not blowing any horns or anything but I really feel like the campus that I was in \_\_\_\_\_ played its role in a sense that we had mentors ... we had supervisors ... we had a course coordinator, all of these people were accessible ... they were willing to ... you know because sometimes in supervision, you need to be mindful of the fact that sometimes it’s just professional and not to let your personal dynamics get into that”, (Topaz, 1).*

The excerpts show that trainee psychologists experienced the two campuses differently. Site 1 was experienced more supportive than site 2. Ally (2016) hold that a supervisor’s primary role is to provide nurturance and promote growth. This is especially important considering how the findings have alluded to professional support structures having consistently yielded positive outcomes on trainees’ sense of competency on their own personal and professional development throughout the training period. Topaz’s reflections have emphasized the importance of active engagement of supervisors and other supportive resources whose role will be to build on trainees’ competencies.

#### 5.2.2 Debilitating supportive structures

The sub-theme was carefully formulated from references trainees made on the incapacitating effects of unsupportive training environment had on their development. Being at an early stage of professional career, trainees go through a rollercoaster of emotions where their anxiety and sense of accomplishment is dependent on support received from the training programme itself. The oxymoron in the title of the theme stresses the much-neglected need for professional support structures that training programmes require in order to reinforce a sense of competency among trainee psychologists. The excerpts below illustrate this phenomenon.

*“MI was a very cold environment for me as opposed to now here I feel like its warmer and more welcoming. I think here at \_\_\_\_\_ they are very understanding and supportive and it’s more like a family here. So, what I do when I get here, they have mentorship meetings and that serves as a kind of therapy for you where you just talk about your personal stuff and things that happen on training” (Beryl, 1).*

*“Well, for me I think there wasn’t that much support from the programme itself and that was a general understanding from the class, we felt like we weren’t supported, and the lecturers didn’t have that kind of one-on-one. I mean there are some that you could approach one-on-one, I mean you could approach Quartz and Zircon, but as a class, we always felt like there wasn’t that support... that connection. In general, you couldn’t just go to anyone and be like ... ‘I am struggling’ because we felt like we were being evaluated all the time” (Emerald, 1).*

*“There wasn’t that much support in the sense that nothing was ever said that ... ‘wow you are really doing well’. I mean first of all you are going to become a therapist and you are not doing well and you kind of need that validation. I think when you are becoming a professional you need someone to tell you that you are doing good” (Emerald, 1).*

In the above excerpts, data revealed that in instances where trainees felt minimum input was made by the training institutions in terms of fostering professional growth and development. Emerald expressed how the supervisor could have provided more useful, corrective feedback and not only the deficiencies as this tended to weigh in concerns of professional abilities and competencies as substantial focus was placed on the evaluative aspect of the training. Ally (2016) emphasized that it is pivotal for feedback to trainees from their supervisors has to be framed in a positive manner. This is so that the trainee feels more confident in their professional abilities and improves their perception of control in areas they may still need to develop.

The meso system level has elaborated on the interconnections that exist as part of multiple systems involved in the development process of individuals as they rotated between the different placement sites for their training over time. The interconnections occurring at the mesosystem level were found to increase the likelihood of systems having overlapping influence on individuals. The themes and sub-themes provided in the meso have been the most extensive trainees in sharing their training experiences and possibly has been persistent in understanding how they may have arrived at their perceptions of the preparedness for intern

roles. The chapter, which delineated the interconnections of the mesosystem level can then be a practical example the current study uses to call on the departments in the respective campuses to actively and consistently engage trainees in the process reflections of their training.

## CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS OF EXOSYSTEM AND MACROSYSTEM LEVELS

### 6.1 Chapter introduction

Data was analysed using the ecological framework. Chapter Five focused on the meso level and Chapter Six presents emergent data from the analyses at the exo and macro level. The chapter further aims to illustrate the real-life overlap of the two systems. The amalgamation of findings, relevant to the above-mentioned systems presented as themes and sub-themes highlights the influence of the external contextual factors of each system level as well as how individuals are affected by what occurs in these systems. Lastly, the chapter illuminates the trickle-down effect of contextual and systemic factors throughout the ecological system model, while illustrating aspects of how these systems rarely operate in isolation. Relevant themes and sub-themes related to external factors presented below.

### 6.2 Supervisor-supervisee dynamics in the two-years of professional training

The interaction of external environmental factors took precedence within the chapter, as the theme explored the *supervisor-supervisee dynamics* reported. Trainee psychologists shared their experiences and perceptions of the professional relationships they had with their supervisors throughout the training as influenced by the systems. Findings predominantly focused on the interpersonal relations that existed between supervisors and trainee psychologists across the span of the master's in psychology training programme. Trainees reflected meaningfully on supervision, and reports revealed how clinical supervision was often met with distress and with findings characterised by undesirable outcomes, negatively impacting their professional development.

*"I kept seeing my psychologist and I knew I had troubles with one of my supervisors, which was a result of miscommunication. I ended up going to see my psychologist about that and she helped me deal with that"* (Emerald, 1).

*"Now thinking about it, last year I had a very bad experience with supervision that I was getting at the time at the clinic, so there was that stress that I was not getting enough supervision both sides and now I felt like I didn't know what I was doing"* (Jade, 1).

*"I wouldn't say that I had that much support from my supervisor, even the one in second semester though I would meet up with her every week ...there were certain things they would encourage us to do ...like if you are going through some stuff you can open up*



*about it but that was difficult because in your mind you have that thought of being evaluated then you would be like ... I would rather not say it and maybe talk to my therapist” (Jade, 1).*

The current study was instrumental in illustrating the significant influence of the two components on trainee psychologists’ perceptions of their professional competency as suggested by Ivey and Waldeck (2014). However, the findings alluded to how the lack of support in supervisor-supervisee relationships evokes negative experiences including those of trainees not being confident in their skills and knowledge (Pakdaman, Shafranske & Falender, 2015). The relational and power dynamics were identified to have a direct influence on the individual’s development and subsequently effected changes within the exosystem, as excerpts demonstrate:

*“There was no support even the supervision was more academic and professional as opposed to here -----where they ask you how you are doing and if you are not doing well as a psychologist, you can’t help other people to do well. I feel like now I’m learning a lot than last year, my MI was characterised by a lot of anxiety and the fact that I had to impress my supervisors” (Beryl, 1).*

*“It got really confusing because with the orange forms that we get at the beginning of the year, which state that you will have supervision every week but then with me I only saw my supervisor once a month, which meant that I wasn’t seeing clients ...such that I finished my hours later in the year in November because of the rule that prohibits seeing clients before being supervised” (Jade, 1).*

Trainees seek the counsel of their supervisors when they experience emotional and cognitive vulnerability, often evoked as a result of being thrown into the deep end of the psychology professional practice (Skovholt, 2012). In this regard, findings have strengthened the claims that supervision plays a significant role on trainee psychologists perceived professional development especially at the peak of their vulnerability (Skovholt, 2012; Pakdaman et al., 2015). Current findings revealed that clinical supervision without positive reinforcement and support consequently made trainees have reservations with what they brought to supervision as they felt opening up to supervisors would negatively impact their evaluation. Some trainees, Emerald further mentioned how she encountered supervision related challenges that she discussed and resolved in personal therapy to avoid being penalised for “over sharing”.

*“I think for me when I was supervised by Ruby in the second semester, she was the first person who was like... ‘Wow Emerald, I, you are doing well...you really are good’ and it was the first time I actually felt like I can really do this. All that was needed was like one-on-one sit down and someone to tell you some positive stuff because it’s always the negative ...” (Emerald, 1).*

Trainees have engaged extensively on the different dynamics experienced during the training relating to supervisory relationships. Despite having reported an unpleasant experience with the first supervisor, Emerald was one of the few trainee psychologists to describe the positive impact that her supervisor had during her internship. Emerald deliberated on the experience of having a supervisor that was able to acknowledge and validate her strides, which was reported to have been received as positive enforcement and propelled her to engage in supervision. The excerpts below reflect on this phenomenon.

The current findings confirm that clinical supervision serves to be an influential component of the psychology training programme. Elaborating on how the relational dynamics between supervisor and supervisees greatly impacted trainees perceived personal competency and professional growth. Some trainee psychologists reported being disillusioned when supervisors were unable to provide the support they needed. As a result, the trainee psychologists experience overwhelming negative emotions of anger, disappointment, and confusion. The researcher thus noted the emergent findings of the overall theme of *supervisor-supervisee dynamics* as being the start point for resolving any issues arising between trainees and supervisors.

### 6.3 Evaluation as anxiety provoking

Similar to the findings reported above, trainees further indicated how being evaluated tremendously impacted their perceived development, as the below was reported:

*“For me personally it was difficult to go and talk to someone whenever I had a problem because in your mind that they already do not like you and it would be like you can’t handle the pressure and if you can’t handle the pressure then I am going to be kicked out of the programme” (Jade, 1).*

Jade and other trainees further reported difficulties with opening up to the lecturers and supervisors about the challenges they faced during training, especially if one felt that they were not coping. Consequently, trainees were seen commenting on the direct link this had on them not being able to open up to their supervisors regarding the challenges faced as they feared this

would negatively impacting their “development” or perceived progress during training. Excerpts have further shown how the process of evaluation proved to be anxiety provoking and notably affected help-seeking.

*“There were certain things they would encourage us to do ...like if you are going through some stuff you can open up about it but that was difficult because in your mind you have that thought of being evaluated then you would be like ... I would rather not say it and maybe talk to my therapist” (Jade, 1).*

*“Even with supervision, it was mostly you are telling the supervisor about what you went through, they don’t expect you to ask them ‘what do you do’ but they expect you to say, ‘I was thinking this this and that’. So, I felt like it was very demanding, and there was a lot of pressure there, especially in terms of what you supposed to know; it was draining” (Beryl, 1).*

*“In general, you couldn’t just go to anyone and be like ... ‘I am struggling’ because we felt like we were being evaluated all the time. You wouldn’t just go to and be like ‘oh my word I am struggling, and I am not coping’ because he would be evaluating you at the end of the day” (Emerald, 1).*

As illustrated in the excerpts above, some of the trainee psychologists indicated how being in an evaluative environment strongly influenced their perception of their own development as they became more self-critical as the pressures of being evaluated increased. Research by Tweed, Graber and Wang (2010) posited that speculations can be made regarding supervisor’s evaluation of trainees’ clinical competence. The dynamic and active process of constructing shared meaning between two individuals is an amalgamation of shared ideas, beliefs, values, practices, language, spirituality and symbol. Therefore, careful considerations are warranted as positions of power, privilege and oppression may impact the outcomes of supervisory relationships in professional psychology (Watkins et al., 2019). It has become increasingly evident that all evaluations are bound by the context of the supervisory relationship largely and how two individuals build and sustain a working relationship (Tweed et al., 2010).

The abovementioned influence of the supervisory relationship on trainees’ development was observed in how trainees would positively select information to bring to supervision and being reluctant to present work that they felt they did not do well (Tweed et al., 2010). This could be reflective of the shame or anxiety associated with not having all the answers and how the supervisor may perceive them, and potentially cause difficulties for trainee self-evaluation. The

findings of the current study as the excerpts concur with Tweed et al (2010), further highlighting how the supervisory relationship may pose as threat to one's perceived competence and negatively impact trainee's perceived professional development. Findings of the current study show that most trainees associated their stress as the evaluative nature of supervision weigh heavily on how they perceived their competencies and professional development. As seen in the excerpts above, majority of trainees in the current study found supervision unhelpful and unsupportive. Trainees expressed feeling like they were expected to be professional and know what to do even before they have received supervision on cases which exacerbated performance anxieties and feeling of inadequacy.

#### 6.4 Formal training on professional development

Exploring the formalities of the training programme and unpacking trainees' perceptions of their professional development and how much of those were influenced by supervisory relationship. The current theme thus reports on findings that are of constructive contribution to understanding the needs of trainee psychologists with the aim of enabling them to develop confidence in their professional development. The interviewing process prompted trainees to reflect on the journey and trainees were able to denote how the experiences, whether good or bad, contributed to their overall development, which is reflected on the excerpts below.

*"Preparing students for the master's training needs to start at honours. It's impossible to have like 220 students in the honours class and only select 12 for the master's class. You can't have that, that's too many people and it shouldn't be like that because you supposed to be grounding and grooming them so that in master's they don't feel like they are drowning" (Emerald, 1).*

*"I think it challenges you in a way...for me, the takeaway lesson from my study or the theory was that you eventually get through it, and how much you get out of situations is how much you put into it, there is no other way around that" (Olivine, 1).*

The reality of conducting therapy while still acquiring the skill set required to build trainees' proficiency in conducting psychotherapy appeared to be another source of stress for multiple trainees in the study. The excerpts above indicated how various stages of development trainees undergo throughout their professional lives, highlighting how they have had to be professionally competent which was considered challenges by some as insufficient was done at honours level as Emerald indicated.

*“Personally, M1 has groomed me a lot more, it’s impact has been more than that of the internship in terms of personal and professional growth. Of course, I can’t separate the two but personally it has helped me a lot to grow up and be more mature in terms of how the workplace is like and this is how the profession is and I have to suck it up and just do it, so yes M1 has groomed me a lot personally” (Beryl, 1).*

*“I think the experiences are different, you learn a lot of theory and the close guidance from our supervisors ...but I think it’s just like any other profession that you just have to experience the transition for yourself. There’s really nothing that can caution you for it. The experience was great but the preparation ...I mean the theory prepared you for some of it ...at least you know what basic coping skills are” (Olivine, 1).*

The excerpts above have demonstrated that trainees were able to reflect on multiple contextual factors that they felt the psychology professional training assisted in formulating their development. For instance, Beryl expressed that the first year of training, M1, contributed not only to her personal development but professional too as she learnt how to manage her time and how to carry herself in professional workspaces. In hindsight, Olivine also made remarks on how the developments of trainees was equally the training institutions’ responsibility as much as it was the trainees. The onus was not only on the institution offering the training but also how receptive trainees were to the developmental milestones of minimal requirements for the course from a professional practitioner’ development perspective (Ally, 2016; Pakenham et al., 2012).

### 6.5 Experiential learning

The theme was derived from the emergent theme discuss above and further adds to the different ways trainees may have accumulated knowledge and skill set throughout the professional journey. To give insight to the context of the theme, the study has provided a working definition for the phrase “experiential learning”, which is used to describe the knowledge, emotional awareness and in-depth understanding that can only be acquired through first-hand personal experience or engaging with other people about their experiences as informed by Deveney (2021). The development of professional competencies involves inner processes of ongoing reflection of personal and professional experiences as trainees as reiterated in the above themes. Moreover, an analysis of data has also revealed that some of the challenges trainees experienced were feelings of uncertainty about their own professional abilities and felt inadequately prepared to provide psychotherapy that would be to the benefit of the client served.

*“When you are sitting there with the client, it’s totally different from what you would read from books in class... this one time I had a client that had a personality disorder, and I didn’t know how to manage it. It was in January and there was still that anxiety that I am from M1 and now I am in my internship....”. “For example, you are learning about borderline personality disorder you get to understand it ...its very different when you are sitting with a client” (Jade, 1).*

Jade described the difference in dynamics within the therapist-client relationship and how coming into the internship with textbook knowledge, one feels the shift when they have a real person, presenting with mental illness and the psychologist being expected to help manage the condition.

*“You don’t have time to go back to the drawing board in M1 ... M1 doesn’t have time for you to do that, you just do and there’s no time for you to go to the drawing board, you are just going, and you will breathe later. Literally, all of us were just like ‘we will sleep after M1’ ...that’s why most people, when they’re done with M1 they just cut everyone off, M1 is awful” (Beryl, 2).*

As seen above for instance, Beryl’s personal experiences as she made references to demands of the training programme invoked feelings of being overwhelmed by professional needs and managing time while still grappling with achieving a cohesive sense of professional competence. Understanding the anxiety trainee psychologists may grapple with, coming into professional spaces where they are given a greater responsibility including clients, may propel training institution to put buffers such as professional support systems at the university and internship sites. This is important to consider as trainees may only be directly functioning at the university psychology clinic however are indirectly impacted by the formal and informal structures that form part of the entire professional training and are in return feeling out of place as a result of what is regarded important in the programme. These would help distinguish one’s personal needs from professional needs and increase access to support structures, specifically training staff, for them to check-in on themselves to which trainees reported positive feedback on as stated below:

*“At my current workplace, if you are failing at something, they are willing to help you, they spend more than 30 minutes asking you how you are doing and how are you feeling as opposed to \_\_\_\_\_ where you are just expected to know everything, I mean you just come from honours, how are you supposed to know everything, you wonder” (Beryl, 2).*

*“I really feel like the campus that I was in \_\_\_\_\_ played its role in a sense that we had mentors ...we had supervisors ...we had a course coordinator, all of these people were accessible ... and they were willing to help, you know, because sometimes in supervision you need to be mindful of the fact that sometimes it’s just professional and not to let your personal dynamics get into that. So, they were accessible enough to the extent that and they made it compulsory as well, the mentorship and supervision... it really helped. So, it was formal in M1...” (Topaz, 1).*

The general sense of the data above revealed that trainees felt satisfied with the supervision and mentorship when they experienced supervisory support with findings highlighting the positive feedback and guidance from their supervisors both in university and internship sites.

### **6.7 The importance of dialogical spaces**

The interconnected processes of the exo-system that occur in more than more settings which have either direct or indirect influence has set precedence for the concept of dialogical spaces. A dialogical space is characterised by dialogue and uses information presented in a form of a dialogue, highlighting communicative nuances of the subject at hand. The protective factor of the supportive structures made available in specific environments as excerpts in the above theme by Topaz have highlighted. A dialogical analysis of direct and indirect discourses of the training programme and other conditions may provide insight to the subjective experiences of trainees as it may be intimidating for trainees to articulate, sufficiently, what they need guidance with. Trainee psychologists demonstrated the need for more opportunities for transformational learning spaces that allow for discourse to be unpacked in a non-threatening or evaluative way:

*“I feel like at the end of the day, we only had like one support group. As such, where someone came and asked how we were feeling, and we loved that as a class because we felt like it was an opportunity for us to express ourselves. Apart from that, we felt like there were no support structures. I know from my honours class at the other campus, it was awesome, and I felt supported, and I am still in contact with most of the*

*lecturers. For me here, I felt like there wasn't and in master's I feel like you need external support in the form of family and friends and if you don't have that support and then you also don't have it here... it can get really ugly"* (Emerald, 1).

*"I remember this one time...you know how we would have our normal lectures and stuff...I think it was on Tuesday or Monday we would have psychotherapy and sometimes they would bring in speakers. This one time there was this guy who was supposed to conduct and lead the discussion, the moment he walked in he said, 'I can feel the tension'. He was the first person who asked us how we were doing, and we did not get that throughout the year and when he asked, it was very emotional, and we didn't do what we were supposed to do. It was like a group therapy session"* (Jade, 1).

*"The second time it happened it was with the lecturer who was teaching us \_\_\_\_\_, which is Onyx, she also said the same thing the moment she walked into the room. She asked us how we were doing, we were not saying they should 'baby us' but just to ask how we were doing. Even if they didn't ask us about our personal stuff but just to find out how we were finding the course or things like that, we never got any of that. In terms of formal support, for me it was that whole bearer that we couldn't reach out",* (Jade, 1).

*"For me if they can maybe do focus groups maybe once in a term or whatever just to find out how people are doing but there should someone who is external, someone who won't be biased or whatever"* (Beryl,1).

The emergent findings, predominantly demonstrated by the excerpts above, have placed emphasis on the positive attributes that dialogical spaces have on trainees' professional development. Participants noticeably shared sentiments on the importance of having safe and trusting spaces where they could be vulnerable with fellow trainees towards reaching professional developmental milestones. Excerpts of trainees' reflections are suggestive of reflexive learning, through engaging in dialogical spaces, which was found to be instrumental in shifting perspective of education. Findings suggest that education should not only be a process of individual success or failure but should aim at increasing individuals and groups' potential to effectively engage in relational processes. Contributions by Topaz have made it explicitly clear how environmental support structures positively influence professional development. The experiences within the current chapter were reflective of emerging campus



related challenges that suggest substantial influence on trainees' perceptions of their professional development.

## 6.8 Macrosystem

Macrosystem is often described as the umbrella system, exerting influence on numerous sub-systems, that give shape to contextual interpretations of each system at an individual level (Dalla, 2006). Macrosystem unveils the culture or social conditions within which an individual function (Ah Yoo & Chung Huang, 2013). The macro level is reflective of the deeply entrenched structural and systemic factors that influence a person's living context and life outcomes known as the cultural 'blueprint' of any given society (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Makhakhe, 2017). Garbarino and Ganzel (2000) indicated that the said blueprint can be described as the amalgamation of ideological and institutional systems that characterise a particular culture or subculture. Overarching values, practices and social norms substantially influences personal and professional development, the current chapter will thus demonstrate how social views filter through the other systems. The analysis of data further revealed how trainees interpreted or anticipated future experiences as contextual factors are elaborated below.

### 6.8.1 Placement efficacy as per training requirements

The placement efficacy theme explored not only the experiences of the trainees in the training but further looked into how training institutions were equipped for training these aspiring psychologists. The emergent data as previous themes have revealed has substantially been on professional competencies of trainees and their proficiency on clinical knowledge and therapeutic skills. However, some trainees have mentioned other contextual factors, such as training institution efficacy, also involved in their professional development. The findings demonstrate influential variables of the programme, attributed to trainees' perceived preparedness, in addition to the mandatory requirements of the psychology professional training. Below are examples of what participants shared.

*"I feel like I am learning more now that I am here than last year, and I guess maybe that is because of the exposure to clients that we get, it's much more than what we would get at UKZN. I feel like this year, especially in the first six months, I have learnt a lot this year than I did last year"* (Jade, 1).

*"It was a big transition from obviously just being a full-time student at to being a full-time student and part-time professional simultaneously because we had our placements,*

*and we were required to be strictly professional during our placements as well”*  
(Topaz, 1).

The professional journey has evidently, not been the same for each trainee that has shared their experiences in the study. As trainees began to move through their professional training from being student psychologists to intern psychologists, the exposure to the clinical programme and observing clinical work which enhanced their personal growth resulting in more rich experiences on the programme. Gaining more confidence with their clients allowed them to critically reflect on efficacy of the training and how much they were learning from the placements and the overall efficacy of the programme on their professional proficiency.

#### *6.8.1.1 Untoward training outcomes*

*“The whole year, so it was very limiting; I hardly saw any clients, even if I did, they could not have been long term because I was there on certain days. The placements need to be re-evaluated at but then I understand that there is such limited capacity to take counsellors, clinical is lucky enough to go to hospitals. In terms of placements something needs to be done because I think there is a lack of the practical side”*  
(Emerald, 1).

*“When it comes to the placement site...honestly there is not much I can say about that site, I didn’t see that many people there. Even my supervision at the placement site was not constant. For me, placement was somehow a waste of time because there wasn’t that much exposure even at the clinic itself, I only saw two clients the whole year. So being someone who is used to seeing two people a year to being someone who sees five people a day was exhausting. The first 6 months were quiet challenging for me; in May I was already burning out but now you get used to it ...but at first, it’s quiet challenging”* (Jade, 1).

Trainees are required to acquire numerous complex skills in order to function effectively however from the data trainees felt strongly that the first (M1) year did not adequately train or prepare them for the level of performance required. A major source of frustration and emotional exhaustion experienced by trainee psychologists as excerpts above indicate, was that of being inadequately exposed with cases that afforded them exposure to technical skills and more time to engage with a variety of cases in sessions as placement sites were experienced as limitation on their professional competency.

#### 6.8.1.2 Proficient training

*“Our M1 training did it’s best to train us professionally, so I am going to answer making reference to that. So, they did their best in the sense that they made sure that we covered as much assessments as we could because every assessment that I have done in M2 was covered in M1. They made sure that we learnt a whole lot of theories and they reinforced those theories, they made sure of that” (Topaz, 1).*

*“I’m just touching a bit on the professional aspects that are required from during an internship. I think the one area that we were not adequately trained in therapy, but then again looking at the structure and timing of the programme and all of that, you do therapy part time in your M1 in during placement, and you go to supervision for that but it’s not as intense as with M2” (Topaz, 1).*

According to Gerber and Hoelson (2011) South African psychologists are required to practice in an extremely multifaceted and complex contexts which places demands on training institutions in terms of the quality of psychology trainee produced regarding the requisite skills. Despite being the only trainee to attest to the proficiency of the training institution on professional development, an analysis of Topaz’s reflections revealed that she felt satisfied with the preparation she received from the university, grooming them for the internship site.

#### 6.8.1.3 Scope of “practicality”

*“I feel like there should be a clear distinction between the clinical and counselling psychology training process because of the mere fact that even with HPCSA the scope of practice is different. I get that there is not enough infrastructure ... there is not enough capacity to do that. Other universities, such as the university of Pretoria they split their classes because somehow even though what clinical students do is somehow similar to what we do but there is a different scope of practice” (Emerald, 1).*

Some of the emergent concerns expressed by trainees on the efficacy of training programmes was that of the therapeutic practice across the different specialities and practicality of the training offered by the institution. Emerald expressed disillusionment with the impracticality of the master’s training model as scopes of practices are not the same after qualifying.

#### 6.8.1.4 Building resilience

*“I think the training experience really made me more resilient ... it taught me that if you really want something you can...you will get it. I think it taught me a lot in terms of my personal growth and it kind of showed me where I want to be as a psychologist.*

*I think this year, internship year is the year where you truly find your feet and who you want to be” (Emerald, 1).*

*“Internship is overwhelming, and it’s always been but I’m surviving in a sense that it’s not consuming me... I’m still able to sleep at night ...I still have a social life, but the anxiety is still there of course. I still have a bit of panic when I’m seeing a new patient or when I’m doing a new assessment, and stuff like that, but It’s not maladaptive anxiety...it’s not dysfunctional ... it’s there but I’m surviving. My head is above water” (Topaz, 1).*

How placement efficacy was explored in the study is reflected from emerging sub-themes above. The researcher was aware of how contributions made by the minority in a research study often fall through the cracks within such spaces sub-themes were adopted to best illustrate social views on important values of the training programme. The excerpts serve as a reflection of the general public’s culture and sub-cultures as well as the broad South African context. The chapter considered most if not all of the structural challenges such as the incapacitated training institution and inadequate infrastructure to accommodate the aspiring psychologists of the contemporary South Africa. The level of disappointment trainees may have expressed in the study process may have been of their individual expectation of an ideal psychology professional training programme, not having taken into account the other systems that influence the professional growth.

### 6.9 Socially constructed norms

In relation to the socially constructed norms, trainee psychologists reported having found themselves being immensely restricted by the very same ideologies and norms that they are deeply entrenched in the course and shape their lives. Beryl and Jade have shed insight from personal experiences on how these social norms have been a gateway to the hurdles trainees need to overcome as they integrate their personal and professional selves, alluding to the interaction between the micro and macro systems being the ultimate determinants of life outcomes.

*“Being a black woman, you are traditionally expected to go back home to cook and clean...take care of your family. So, there were a lot of demands from my personal life” (Beryl, 1).*

*“It was brutal in the sense that the training itself demanded a lot from you and at the same time you are dealing with a lot as a person in terms of social demands and family wise” (Jade, 1).*

#### 6.10 Medium of connecting with others

Interestingly, there appeared to be a sense of acknowledgement from trainee psychologists regarding how communicating and forming connections with others go beyond language (spoken) barriers. This reflection is however contrary to extant literature stating that language differences negatively impact work with clients. The excerpts below serve to illustrate how trainees felt connected with others in various ways despite not speaking the same “language”. This is especially necessary for trainee psychologists to be accustomed to as this would acknowledge and further highlight other forms of connecting, such as borrowing from the different perspective of others to inform theirs. This may appear as embracing religious and spiritual facets of one’s life, learning about the two cultures and linguistic nuances of others attributed positively to not only personal but also professional competencies, bearing in mind the diverse South African context and how being a diversified psychology helps reach a wider audience, which Olivine elaborated below.

*“The interesting thing is that on a personal development kind of level, it has actually been a chance to actually venture into other areas of personal growth. For example, because of the extent of COVID-19 induced lockdown, I registered to learn two new languages and I have really been enjoying myself and what it has done because everything has become virtual, it’s a world, what it does is that it opens up your world to other cultures and other people” (Olivine, 2).*

*“Now that I think about it, it is like here are these distinct cultures that invoke different emotions within me, even though someone would say, it is just studying the language. It is almost like when you are speaking English or your native language, you’re almost like two different people because the expression is different, so it is quite psychological in a way. I don’t know if maybe subconsciously my personal development somewhat led me tapping into my professional growth” (Olivine, 2).*

Beryl was the one trainee that revealed that their religious and spiritual belief systems was a countenance mechanism that also served as a self-reflective strategy. This was perceived as enabling and assisted them in maintaining a sense of hope and guidance with regard to their

personal and professional development further highlighting the interconnectedness of the micro and macro systems, see excerpt below.

*“A lot of religion... I am a Christian so a lot of praying ...worship ... church as well and I would also say a lot of talking to friends and stuff, normalizing not containing my feelings. I feel like the more you know your friends are going through the same thing the more you feel like its ok ... so it was through spiritual realms through peers and therapy as well” (Beryl, 2).*

### 6.11 Inspiring social sciences competencies

Engaging with the study’s research process, trainees have meaningfully built on their emotional and intellectual insight, as they needed constantly be cognisant of all the broader contextual factors that influence their professional training and general profession.

*“I don’t think it’s enough to just discuss it for one day or hours or something, it’s not enough because you are getting woman that are being raped every other second and you start taking their history and she has a history of sexual abuse, and that’s like 1 in 3 women. Yes, in literature it made sense but now you are sitting with someone who has faced trauma now how do you start to integrate that if you don’t have the foundation to integrate it with... so I would say trauma, trauma, trauma...because this is a South African context. I think it’s pointless to have a programme that doesn’t focus on trauma where we have patients that are schizophrenic and only to find that even that is caused by trauma” (Olivine, 2).*

In retrospect, the following sentiments were shared by trainees with efforts to reduce the overwhelming impact of structural and systemic challenges on their development, either personally or professionally. Below are examples of what participants shared.

*“Ok, I think that firstly universities need to carry on doing what they can do to prepare us professionally in terms of... just to make sure that the institutions work hand-in-hand with the hospitals and centres where we do our internships. Sometimes you find that people from other institutions in the hospital that we are in ...the places that we trained in don’t know what’s required from the hospitals that we are in” (Topaz, 2).*

*“I think universities and placement sites need to work hand-in-hand in the sense that from their side as an institution they cover everything that they need to cover, and also, they are not training us to stay in institutions but to go to hospitals and hospitals require*

*us to have certain qualities so, I think it's important that they work together in that sense" (Topaz, 2).*

*"Research, I think it would benefit a lot of people if they can be able to finish their research during their M1... whether it's extending your M1 or deliberately making one day of the week your day for research. I think that's the one major thing that institutions can help in ... to make sure that by the time students start their internship, their research is done but then again with HPCSA the rules have changed" (Topaz, 2).*

The process reflection has allowed for trainees to make contribute towards the training programme's area of development. Trainees have constructive feedback on what they felt they would aid the professional competencies and to ensure trainees adequately conduct their tasks from the onset of the training. Topaz in the excerpts above, has called for broader structural factors that in turn impact their professional growth with the aim of alleviating experiences of distress trainees encounter in the programme. One of the key structural developments raised by the raised by the trainees was that of improving the working relationships between training universities and placement hospitals as they were confronted with inconsistencies in terms of training outcomes at different stages of the training.

#### **6.12 Declaration of a National State of Disaster: COVID-19 and its' impact on the professional training.**

Data collection spanned over two-years and in those two years, follow-up interviews were just after the world was affected by the pandemic, COVID-19. The pandemic had unprecedented, transformational effects on professional psychology training within just a few months. The effects of COVID-19 led to rapidly changing daily lives, imposing even greater undue stress on trainees and Olivine shared her experiences of the effects the pandemic impose on her professional development:

*"The pandemic was not good for the situation because it's unprecedented. Challenges for all the trainees were not limited to not having the option to go through processes manually. The reasons for saying this is because I was directly influenced by it. Even though I am not ready to write the board exams yet because I haven't finished the dissertation, a lot of us have been anxious because people keep talking about it so much so that it brings a lot of anxiety. You're not sure what the next step is going to be. There is a fair level of, in my case, lack of motivation with regards to proceeding with my dissertation and all of that" (Olivine, 2).*



*“I think sometimes you keep wondering, then what, then what? Asking yourself how it’s going to be like in the future, what are the opportunities and as much as there are a lot of opportunities, regarding mental health, we all know the psychological impact of COVID-19 on people. It’s almost like there is more mental health care users (MHCUs) but there aren’t any resources to actually provide them with mental health care services” (Olivine, 2).*

### 6.13 COVID-19 regulations on international trainees

*“Another thing for me, being an international student, and having known all this time that I may need to apply overseas to get a job because I can’t really get anything in South Africa because I can’t do community service because I am not a citizen. It has become more anxiety provoking because now with all the borders shut and all that, it is like what’s next? So, I would say there is some level of anxiety that has been caused. It has caused, for me, a lot of procrastination and lots of uncertainty in terms of what the future holds. I know that this is just a transition stage, but it’s been really hard to kind of like to pull out of the deep demotivated place” (Olivine, 2).*

*“I would say that the big things for me have been feelings of despondency, the anxiety and being uncertain about the future and questioning if all of this will amount to something at the end of the day like where am I going to get a job? Will I be allowed to cross borders?” (Olivine, 2).*

As the excerpt above demonstrates, the pandemic has encouraged enhanced communication within the whole training community and has suggested a focus on defining our professional priorities. The professional psychology training community has faced and will continue to face multifaceted and complex problems as a result of the pandemic (Goghari, Hagstrom, Madon & Messer-Engel, 2020). This is inclusive of the reported structural and systemic mishaps that confront the academic program, internship, accreditation and other regulatory functions involved in the training process (Goghari et al., 2020). The macrosystem level has highlighted, with the use of practical examples given by trainees, how systemic and structural factors furthest to an individual can still influence the personal trajectory of training psychologist despite their direct engagement in that system. Furthermore, people’s perceptions of the resources and the structural opportunities at their disposal substantially inform the capacity to use the resources accessible to them at any given stage of their training.



#### 6.14 In closure, moving towards virtual spaces: Who is left behind/excluded?

In exploring the multiple contextual factors, the research study further attempted to monitor the shift in the influence of internal and external factors on trainee psychologist amidst the pandemic. The abovementioned experiences of trainees, particularly challenges faced as a result of COVID-19 have indicated an inception of a new range of struggles to the professional training. Excerpts demonstrated the extent of the pandemic impact not only on the world and broader external context but also how it has affected trainees individually as they pursued training. The theme sheds light on the participant reflection, with the aim of raising awareness around the forecasted compatibility of shifting towards telemedicine and providing services virtually within a South African context.

*“An example is you find that in response to the COVID-19, I would say almost every country in the world has made sure that their medical staff is a priority, and they probably even employed more nurses and are looking for more medical staff, but you find that in developing countries, they are only starting to implement strategies for mental health care users. There’s now telemedicine and virtual psychotherapy and the government is financing those programs calling for more mental healthcare workers to use those platforms. But in our case, the African context, that’s not happening. There has been an increase in mental health care users, but not enough resources are allocated to enable counsellors and therapists or practitioners to fulfil their roles. So, it’s still pretty much like you’re in the same situation where mental health is not considered a priority” (Olivine, 2).*

The macrosystem level has highlighted the context-specific influences of external factors found at the socio-ecological level. The emergent findings signified the fibre of the professional psychology training, as it highlights the contextually diverse South African context. Moreover, findings have revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges for professional training, the pandemic has also been a catalyst for change within the profession, encouraging expansion of tele-education and telehealth practices. This is particularly worrisome for a country like South Africa where majority of the population is still living under improvised settings and are without proper infrastructure therefore accessing tele-medicine may be an even greater challenge to access. The above findings, reported systematically according to the ecological framework, have exemplified the significant factors that are at play when looking at the overall development of trainee psychologists. In closing, the study uses

reflective words by one of the trainees in the study to facilitate discourses that pertain to psychology practitioners and the psychology profession at large.

### 6.15 Chapter summary

The chapter has reported on the study's findings through the assimilated discussion, highlighting the interconnected factors, aided by adequate literature relevant to the data presented by study participants (trainee psychologists). In seeking to answering the key research questions, the discussion used the ecological systems framework to map out how each level of the ecological system influenced the professional training and perceived preparedness by trainee psychologists for professional roles. The study has also taken measures to broaden the view of professional competency emphasising the role that the diverse South African context plays in the overall development of trainee psychologists. The data offers evidence-based accounts of the necessity and importance of understanding context when exploring stress and coping among trainee psychologists. However, the meso- and micro systems facilitate how trainee psychologists experience and respond to life stressors and daily work-related demands in the profession.

## CHAPTER 7: SELF-REFLEXIVITY: “*THE RESEARCHER AND TRAINEE PSYCHOLOGISTS ENTANGLED*”

### 7.1 The psychology professional training through the “entangled” lenses

According to Dodgson (2019), all qualitative research is contextual; the study unravelled within a specific time and place between or amongst a particular population group. It is therefore pivotal that the researcher clearly describes the contextually intersecting relationships with the study participants through a process called reflexivity. This is not only to strengthen the study’s credibility but also to deepen the understanding of the inquired phenomena (Dodgson, 2019). As extensively discussed in previous chapters, the current research study focused on exploring the perceived preparedness of trainee psychologists at a selected higher education institution (UKZN) on their new professional roles as intern psychologists.

As the study explored the lived experiences of trainees who were completing the second year (internship) of the training, I as the researcher, was completing my first year (M1) of the same psychology professional programme. This process further helped me as the researcher to always remain cognisant of how my endeavours to explore trainee experiences would influence my own experiences. As Dodgson (2019) postulated that contextual intersectionality ought to be delineated, more so for the current study as both roles were viewed as being highly influential on one another. I separately journaled my personal experiences as a fellow trainee of the psychology master’s programme as I immersed myself in the research study.

Documenting my experiences of the training and the research encouraged a lot of introspection on my end, which helped me to establish whether I was still containing participants’ subjective contributions while keeping in check with my own. The current chapter seeks to illuminate the interconnected characteristics that I, as the researcher (Kvale, 1996) and a trainee psychologist held. Self-reflexivity was intentionally adopted as a process to vigorously reflect on my own subjectivity during the study. The chapter briefly delineates the significant discourses that the study viewed as landmarks of the overall research study and how these were processed interchangeably by me as the researcher and trainee psychologist. Gilbert and Sliep (2009) postulated that reflexivity in contemporary social science literature has been instrumental in different contexts including research, professional practice, and therapy. Reflexivity seeks to highlight the process of coming to an understanding of how one’s actions are formed, factors that influence those actions and how one subsequently engages with the world and others. It is a position of giving voice to historical silences especially in the humanities and social sciences disciplines (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009). I considered the addition of the self-reflexivity chapter to

be especially valuable as the reflexivity chapter allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of myself, as a fellow trainee psychologist and my position in the overall study within the South African context, as well as to better understand the social realities of the participants (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009; Marshall, 2012).

Self-reflexivity became a cornerstone of the study as I sought to reflect on my own experiences, which led to obtaining deeper insight into participants' experiences. As a result, an in-depth understanding of the findings effectively enabled me to probe the data more comprehensively while consistently checking on my own experiences. The research journey rather, leading up to this chapter was enriching for me, given that I am also a trainee psychologist. Numerous times, I attempted to separate my personal experiences from the experiences reported by participants not realising that I shared a significant bond with the participants, which informed the constant inclusion of reflexivity in particular phases of the study such as the adoption of the conceptual framework, data collection and analysis. Becoming mindful of this bond informed my appropriate engagement with the study as I undertook the different roles in the process. The awareness also compelled me to accurately illustrate participants' experiences as theirs and were separate from mine despite the bond that existed. It was important to ensure that the study was not influenced by my own experiences of the training, which was reinforced by the constant reflections and journal entries documented to maintain a clear researcher role. With the aid of reflexivity, I was able to always be mindful of countertransference that may have arisen from the data collection and write-up stages of the study were extensively addressed in supervision.

## 7.2 Interviewing process

Journeying with the self-reflexivity process enabled me to understand the way I positioned myself within the research and how dominant discourses and practices of the discipline of psychology were reflected amongst participants. Sharing similarities with the sample group was so important that I continued to be reflective of my role and subsequent influence towards the study, particularly during the interviewing process. Patton (2002) argued that for an interview process not to easily fall into adopting the role of quasi-counselling, it would require strong reflexivity that ensures boundaries on the researcher role are maintained appropriately (as cited in Webster et al., 2013). Participants' subjective contributions throughout the interviewing process were reinforced by the predetermined questions on the interview schedule, which helped provide a consistent interview context.

Due to the scheduled timeline of the training programme and considering that I too was in the formative phases of the same training, self-reflexivity was instrumental to maintaining clear research and trainee boundaries. Use of the interview schedule further restricted the likelihood of external influential factors to permeate the interviewing/ data collection process and overall direction of the research study. Retrospectively, the constant reflection informed my sense of responsibility as a researcher and how that differed from that of my being a trainee psychologist as I simultaneously learnt from the contributions of the participants and applied those to my personal training.

It became evident that the exploration of participants' perceived preparedness of professional roles subsequently impacted my personal perceptions of the training and instilled a level of competence towards my personal and professional growth. The intersecting relationships between participants and the researcher were initially received as a possible threat to the research study. However, I reflected on the processes of my own professional training and the research project as being separate but could inflict influence on one another. I was offered the opportunity to obtain what I considered as soft knowledge, as this was the nuances attributed to being a researcher while sharing characteristics with the sample population.

The recollection of lived experiences as suggested by Holstein and Gubrium (2011) have the same meaning as telling a story and is considered as an instinct that is fundamental for making sense of one's experiences. The awareness of abovementioned led to me identifying and comparing differences and similarities between training programmes, as well as opening a platform to discuss areas of development as participants had completed the first year of the training. This was particularly essential because of the vulnerability commonly associated with the master's professional training and psychology practitioners, including trainee psychologists. Although I did not train during the same year as the current study's sample, there were some individuals with whom I had established relationships. Therefore, issues around autonomy and confidentiality were raised as part of the interviewing process and participants were reassured those pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities even amongst other participants that were also part of the study.

The data collection process required participants to reflect on their personal experiences, feelings, and behaviours. During this process, I was very conscious of the trust and the rapport established with the participants, which made it difficult for participants to limit what they would be volunteering. I made attempts to ensure that the research participants' engagement

was not compromised in any way, it was important to recognise the proximity of the relationship between the researcher and participants. From an ethical perspective, I was alert for any signs of discomfort or potential withdrawal of consent during the research interview. I had to be constantly aware of my own experiences in the master's training process and through a process of constant reflexivity, I was careful not let my own personal experiences, feeling and ideas taint the accuracy of the experiences being captured.

While preparing for the study's data collection and prior to the commencement of the interviews, I initially had a lot of doubts about my research topic, research aim and objectives. Seeking research supervision and being guided by my skilful supervisor into how to engage with emerging data was extremely helpful, it eased my increasing anxiety. Continuously reflecting on the anxiety, with the help of reflexivity, I was able to establish how the anxiety stemmed from the vast uncertainty, as I was voluntarily continued with the research processes amidst my own professional training. Exploring the experiences of trainee psychologists ahead of me while I was pursuing the same training sensitised me to what I can expect. I subsequently opened to it, embracing the vulnerability that came with it. It was as though courage, fuelled by a strong passion for psychology pushed me towards embracing the uncertainty which in turn built even greater insight on the reported experiences, adding to the rich data outcomes reported in this dissertation.

### 7.3 Unpacking the experience

Embracing the uncertainty that came with exploring the lived experiences of trainee psychologists while I also pursued the same training programme was met with conflictual feelings. The deeper I went into exploring trainees' perceptions of their professional competency, the more I was confronted with feelings of anxiety and self-doubt regarding my own training. These were the times I actively reached out for supervision as I felt that the reported experiences, informing trainee perceptions resembled my own perceptions. Data analysis and writing up the findings and discussion chapter occurred just as I was completing my second year.

During my second (internship) year of training, I had decided to halt conducting the research project concurrently with internship. The reason the research study was postponed until I had completed the internship was due to the internship training being extremely demanding and required me to maintain full awareness of my personal needs before meeting my academic demands. The whole process from exploring this specific topic while I was a trainee myself became increasingly overwhelming and feelings of anxiety and overwhelm were indicative in

my own training as I had been engaging with former trainees and was now analysing the data. In lay terms I would say, I needed to be sober minded when I analysed and reported participants' experiences and subsequent perceptions as I needed to accurately capture the significant findings as reported subjectively by the trainees and not filtered by my personal experiences as well.

As part of my reflexivity after I had resumed data analysis and writing up, I started using audio recordings and recording myself just to contain my personal thoughts and especially emotions invoked by the process. I wanted to discuss during supervision while I vigorously explored the phenomena even deeper. With the aid of the ecological systems framework, I identified how, regardless of the trainee's immediate and interconnected environment, most trainees reported to have been confronted by the same deeply entrenched systemic challenges. It became apparent that the training environment did not change but merely mediated the impact of the top-down social ills that persist within the South African context. In addition to the systematic challenges that the trainees reported, the COVID-19 pandemic announced as a national state of disaster in South Africa in March 2020 added another layer of challenges. Countries around the world, including South Africa went into lockdown which consequently proved to negatively impact on people's livelihoods and the mental well-being.

Coming out of the national lock-down, there was an identifiable increase in the demand of health services within government public sector including mental health services. Working as an intern psychologist in clinical settings, especially during a pandemic proved to be extremely difficult, the uncertainty of what would happen to our training, the possibility of being deployed, as government employees, to work in field hospitals as COVID-19 cases increased was the most challenging part of my own training. The biggest challenge for me personally was having to instil hope and encourage mental health care users to remain positive while I also needed the same reassurance and hope that things will eventually get better than they were at the peak of the pandemic. As I reflected on this experience of being "the class of COVID-19", it dawned on me that professional psychology training is multifaceted and consists of contextually diverse challenges throughout the training process. The main objective was to ensure that despite the formative training requirements, I was able to be reflective of trainees' professional and personal needs so as to continuously adapt to the contextual demands. The self-reflexivity chapter allowed a platform further advancement of my own professional skills and a sense of competency.

#### 7.4 Closing the “chapter” as a trainee psychologist

In conclusion, I have included a verbatim audio-recording transcript of one of my reflexivity activities:

*“As I am wrapping my head around the overwhelming findings of the research study, I am reflecting on what a journey it has been, with this piece of work. Through this reflection, I also realised how significant the pseudonyms used are and the meaning that they can be attributed to in relation to the study’s overall findings. During the process of analysis, I unknowingly or subconsciously decided that I wanted to use names of different gemstones as pseudonyms for trainees that participated in the study, I then searched for the different types and carefully assigned each person included in this study the name of a gemstone. Now that I am taking a moment and stepping away from the research findings to look at the study in its’ totality and how far I have come, I am reminded of how fitting and meaningful the gemstone names were to this study. I, unconsciously associated trainee psychologists to gemstones, we are those gemstones and for the beauty of the gemstone to be visible and admired by others, it must go through the refining process of being cut and polished which is not an easy or pleasant process, but a necessary one. I am grateful for this experience, both years of the professional training were not easy. In a discipline like psychology, which is always changing and adapting itself to the demands of contextual settings, I now see and appreciate how necessary they were for my personal and professional growth and for that sole reason, I will forever be grateful of the experiences that the training facilitated”.*



## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 8.1 Conclusion

The study explored and reported findings indicative of the influential components of contextualised experiences on trainee psychologists' perceived preparedness for their newly acquired professional roles as interns. The study primarily explored the experiences of participants who completed the psychology professional training at University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) Howard College and the Pietermaritzburg campuses. Participants who contributed to the study were identified and recruited from their enrolment at UKZN. Participants hailed from different parts of Africa with contextually diverse backgrounds, and they were living in KwaZulu-Natal for study purposes.

The transactional theory of stress and coping adopted as a conceptual framework helped conceptualise trainees' responses while maintaining the subjectivity of their contributions to the overall study. In adjunct to the transactional theory of stress and coping, the ecological systems theory was used as a theoretical framework with the intent to contextualise study findings. Having the ecological system as the theoretical framework was appropriate to gaining an in-depth understanding the multi-layered scope of trainees' perceptions of their readiness for professional roles. The conclusion chapter summarises the study's accumulative findings including the relevant professional psychology literature, paying careful attention to the contextual and systemic factors that were reflected on trainees' perceptions.

The current study sheds light on trainee psychologists' experiences of the master's professional training programme. The main findings highlighted the demanding and anxiety provoking nature of the training programme. The findings from the microsystem level suggested that most trainees are confronted with challenges around the formation of a sense of self as the training programme was reportedly characterised by ambiguity. As trainee psychologists entered the unexplored wilderness, they expressed the largely unknown sensations, stretching experiences, new perspective and accumulation of knowledge and skills set that awaited them. Trainees described the first year of the training (M1) as ambiguous and without clear guidance of the expected professional development, which contributed to self-doubt. The microsystem analyses further revealed how as trainees experience intensity of interpersonal interactions within their immediate environment. Further, they are more prone to emotional exhaustion and feelings of inadequacy. Emergent findings have shed light on how trainees delved into the complexity of the practice of psychology with reservations due to a lot of uncertainty regarding

what the training programme entailed and what was expected of them. Consequently, the overwhelming ambiguity of the training programme and rudimentary map of becoming a psychotherapist led to unmet expectations from the self (trainee) and from the training environment. The findings further indicated how the reported expectations linked directly to how trainees viewed the evaluation process and the way they received feedback on their professional development.

The study arrived at the following conclusions, as it attempted to understand the reported multifaceted subjective experiences of the professional training, that contributed meaningfully to the perceptions trainees have regarding their professional preparedness. For instance, peer support was identified to mediate the effects of emotional exhaustion as the close relationships formed, correlated with trainees' sense of well-being and positive mood states. Moreover, trainees reporting strong bonds and opening up about their vulnerabilities with their peers was suggestive of peer relationships being in a position to cultivate valuable information required for their growth.

Participants referred to how having a dialogical space or supportive group meetings, although intermittently, in the first year of their training substantially mediated the negative effects of high levels of stress and anxiety provoked by the evaluative process. This also highlighted the training institutions' responsibility to ensure that supportive structures are critical components of the training programme, therefore creating a dialogue that encourages trainees to share challenges confronted during training would facilitate positive effects on their professional development. Realising that knowledge is communally constructed opens a space for understanding our lives and those of others through examining our lived experiences and connecting these to the complexities of our society (Norton, 2018).

The process of having to juggle the manifold clinical, client-related, and academic demands of the professional training process that were associated with being the source of high stress levels that were experienced by trainees. While trainees attempted to maintain a work-life balance throughout the training programme, the absence of adequate support within the programme was suggestive of trainees' increased stress levels and was viewed as a prominent contributor to stressors reportedly experienced by trainees.

The overall findings of the study as observed, presented with multi-layered, contextually rich factors that were identified by trainee psychologists to have tremendous impact on their professional proficiency. Findings identified three major contexts that influence the dynamics

of the interactional relationship between the individual and the environment, peer relations and the training environment. The influences on trainees' professional development, included a higher-order integration of the professional self and the personal self as participants were observed to increase the ability to differentiate responsibilities. This contributed to the study as it revealed interactive factors between ecological systems that can be adopted with the aim to reducing the impact of stressful events and improve well-being.

## 8.2 Recommendations

The study has identified numerous implications of influential factors for the field of professional psychology, specifically in the context of professional psychology training. Recommendations have been formulated with the intent to alleviate the challenges that have emerged in exploring trainee psychologists' perceived preparedness for their newly acquired professional roles:

- Creation of safe, regular space and time for honest supported reflection in group sessions. The emphasis that the study places on the importance of dialogical spaces has two advantageous outcomes that participants (trainee psychologists) in the current study identified. The inclusion of an ongoing peer dialogue into the training programme would not only provide trainees with catharsis but would also evoke constant self-introspection. The study acknowledges that over and above the cathartic effects of sharing an experience, a dialogue amongst trainees will increase their ability and willingness to reflect on their professional experiences with the aim of identifying areas of development to avoid the slow erosion of skills.
- Active and continuous involvement of training directors and internship supervisors, the interrelationships would set precedence for frequent ongoing engagements with the aim of edifying the developments of trainees
- An extensive orientation of the training programmes facilitated by lecturers and supervisors of the training institution could also be introduced the programme and seeks to normalise the heightened vulnerability that may come with having to deal with uncertainty at the early stages of the training. Openly engaging trainee psychologists about the dynamics of the training process may help trainees deal with the high expectation that they put on themselves. Normalising the challenging nature of the

programme could help trainees to critically explore the evoked feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy and realise it as a normal process of the training.

- The study illuminates the need for training institutions to implement concrete organisational support structures within the training environment, sensitive to the needs of the trainees as was described in site 2. Therefore, it is recommended that professional psychology training sites should consider implementing compulsory mentorship programmes and make mental health services freely available to trainees that need them, in addition to technical ‘clinical’ supervision to balance both professional and personal growth from the beginning of the training programme.
- The research study has taken its findings and diligently organised the emergent contextual factors influencing the practice of South African psychology to the socio-ecological model where all the different systems are seen interacting and variables being filtered through. In this light, the study recommends the creation of ongoing informal feedback, before officially documenting the learning experiences, obtained from both supervisors and the supervised. This, as the findings have confirmed, increases the likelihood of more open and honest feedback between trainees and the training programme that evokes an infused development of personal and professional skills. As the data was analysed, an opportunity for positive learning was presented. However, further research would be needed to unpack the intricacies of aiding the experiences of the training process.

### 8.3 Limitations

The findings of the study have proven to be instrumental in terms of providing new insight on the noteworthy roles that contextual factors play on an individuals’ sense of self and subsequent perceptions of their professional competencies. The study has attempted to bridge the existing gap in the literature that focuses on the exploration of trainee psychologists’ experiences. The current research findings, only reflect the perspectives of the specific group of five trainee psychologists enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Conclusions and recommendations of the study, consequently, cannot be generalised to different groups neither can they be applicable to contextually different challenges. The study therefore acknowledges the prospects of arriving at different findings in the instance of

exploring the subjective experiences of different participants. However, trustworthiness was maintained through ensuring that the provided data was respected. The processes of data collection, analysis and reporting were done in a systematic manner and framed within extent theories and methodologies explained in Chapter Three and applied in chapters four, five and six, and the resulting recommendations may also be applicable to other contexts.

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## Appendix A





12 May 2020

Ms Mbalenhle F Ngubane 212521470  
School of Applied Human Sciences – Psychology  
Howard College Campus

Dear Ms Ngubane

Protocol reference number: HSS/0429/019M

**Project Title:** Exploring the perceived preparedness of clinical and counselling psychology students for the newly acquired professional roles as Intern Psychologist.

**Approval Notification – Recertification Application**

Your request for Recertification dated 12 May 2020 was received.

This letter confirms that you have been granted Recertification Approval for a period of one year from the date of this letter. This approval is based strictly on the research protocol submitted and approved in 2019.

**Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. Please quote the above reference number for all queries relating to this study.**

**PLEASE NOTE:** Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years

**All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.**

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane J Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

cc Supervisor: Prof Y Sliep  
cc. Academic Leader Research: Prof R Teer-Tomaselli  
cc. School Administrator: Ms A Ntuli

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building  
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Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

**INSPIRING GREATNESS**

**Appendix B**

**School of Applied Human Sciences- Master of Social Sciences in Clinical Psychology**

## **Participant Informed Consent**

Dear Prospective participant

My name is Mbalenhle Ngubane from the Discipline of Psychology in the School of Applied Human Sciences, Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal. I will be conducting a research study in partial fulfillment of a Master of Social Science in Clinical Psychology degree under the supervision of Professor Yvonne Sliep who is also under the Discipline of Psychology, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on clinical and counselling psychology master's student who are currently completing their second year (internship) of the professional training and are enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College. The aim and purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of the class of 2018 clinical and counselling psychology students in their first year of training and its impact on their academic, emotional and social functioning during training. This study is expected to enroll six participants in total, three clinical psychology students and three counselling psychology students. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to entail one 60 minutes semi-structured individual interview and the study is not funded.

The study does not in any manner involves any risks or discomforts. We hope that the study will not directly benefit you, however, will create benefits such as using the accumulated experiential data to inform postgraduate programmes of the advantages and disadvantages of undergoing an intensive training while providing psychological acts during the first year of training.

Please take note of the following:

- Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event of withdrawal or refusal of participation, you will not incur any penalties
- The information you will provide will remain confidential and anonymous as we will not request any personal identification. Moreover, a pseudonym will be used.
- The information will be used for research purposes and related publications where applicable.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

In the event of any problems or concerns you may contact the research or the research offices on the following contact details:

Mbalenhle Felica Ngubane

School of Applied Human Sciences

Discipline of Psychology

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College

Cell: 0837515399

Email: [ngubane\\_mbalenhle@yahoo.com](mailto:ngubane_mbalenhle@yahoo.com)

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

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### **Participant Declaration**

I..... (Full names) have been informed about the study entitled *Exploring the perceived preparedness of clinical and counselling psychology students for the newly acquired professional roles as intern psychologist in KwaZulu-Natal* by Mbalenhle Felicia Ngubane.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any benefits that I usually am entitled to

If I have any further questions or concerns related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher or research office on the above stated contact details.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

### **Additional Consent**

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview    YES / NO

## **Appendix C**

**School of Applied Human Sciences- Master of Social Sciences in Clinical Psychology**

## **Participant Interview Schedule**

### Greetings/Salutations

My name is Mbalenhle Ngubane, I am a student in the School of Applied Human Sciences under the discipline of psychology at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Howard College. I am working under the supervision of Professor Yvonne Sliep on a research study entitled *“Exploring the perceived preparedness of clinical and counselling psychology students for the newly acquired professional roles as intern psychologist in KwaZulu-Natal”* I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for availing yourself to be part of this study.

For this interview session, I have scheduled questions that I would like to discuss with you, and you are welcome to add any other additional information that you might find valuable to the study. This interview is scheduled for 45-50minutes and there will be a five-minute break if needed.

Please take note of the following important points before we commence with the interview:

- Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event of withdrawal or refusal of participation, you will not incur any penalties
- The information you will provide will remain confidential and anonymous as we will not request any personal identification. Moreover, a pseudonym will be used.
- The information will be used for research purposes and related publications where applicable.

### **Semi-structured interview questions**

1. How would you describe your overall experiences of the first year of the professional training offered by the University of KwaZulu-Natal in preparation for your professional roles as intern psychologist?
2. How has the transition from a student psychologist to an intern psychologist been like for you in the last months, subsequent to completion of the M1 training?
3. Were there any outcomes during the first year of training that rallied your preparedness for the role you now fill? (ie: formal or informal support structures)
4. Reflecting from your own perspective of the professional training, what impact has it prompted in your personal and professional growth?
5. When confronted with difficulties during the training, which avenues were you able to utilize to overcome the stress and anxiety experienced during your first year of training?
6. How would you describe how knowledgeable you were about the adopted coping mechanisms to manage the stress and anxiety?
7. How well did you prioritize your own mental health during your M1 year?
  - How is that different, or the same, from what you prioritize now?
8. Looking back at the training thus far, what recommendation would you give to ensure trainees acquire adequate theoretical and clinical skills?

Thank you kindly for your valuable contribution to the study.